ENVIRONMENT AND ITALY

Ecocriticism and Italy

Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation

Serenella Iovino

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This book tells Italian stories of ecology, resistance, and liberation. But we all know that the substance of these stories materializes every day in those who throw their bodies into the struggle, as Pier Paolo Pasolini would say, and do so on behalf of us all. One of these persons was the anti-ecomafia magistrate Federico Bisceglia (1971–2015). His memory is alive, and so is his struggle.

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Introduction

Ecocriticism and Italy

What you see on the cover of this book is the *Cretto di Gibellina* by Alberto Burri. Visible from satellites and extended over a surface of nearly ten hectares, this is one of the world's biggest works of land art. But the *Cretto*—literally a "cracked surface"—is also something else. It is the material narrative about an event—an earthquake—that affected western Sicily, one of Italy's poorest areas, in 1968. The story embedded in this work is powerful. Not only does the *Cretto* tell us about a physical breach in time, one rippling in a sequence of fissures and losses, but it also tells us about the dynamics of society and nature, of environment and politics, and about how the creative responses to these dynamics have become a part of Italy's bodily narratives. A similar combination of elements and signs emerge from the porous landscapes and bodies of Naples, from the amphibious beauty and contradictory fate of Venice, from the slow, enduring struggles of Piedmont's vineyards and asbestos factories. All these landscapes and more-than-human collectives are *texts* bearing material stories—stories of resistance and creativity that transcend their local reality, demanding to be read and thus liberated from their silence.

Ecocriticism and Italy will do exactly this: it will show and finally give a voice, via four exemplary cases, to the forces, signs, wounds, and messages of creativity dispersed on Italy's body, always keeping in mind the link between the ecology, both cultural and physical, of this country and the world's larger ecology of ideas and matter. Even though the narratives included here develop principally from this country, in fact, *Ecocriticism and Italy* is not simply a book *about* Italy. If a lesson has to be drawn from the environmental humanities debate of the last decade, then it is about how difficult it is to "locate" environmental phenomena. Notions like "ecoglobalization" and "ecocosmopolitanism," and even more like "trans-locality" and "trans-corporeality,"

generate in our perception a sense of dissemination and continuity, of perviousness and transition, pointing at links and bonds that are as arduous to trace as they are impossible to delimit. In a sense, we are in a place, but the flows of energy, foods, money, pollutants, and other relevant matter and ideas mean that our being is the outcome of much more widespread and physically diffused systems. To put it in other terms, we are at once here and elsewhere; vice versa, what affects the life of other places and beings has unsuspected reverberations in space and time, eventually touching our bodies and backyards, too. This is the framework within which the explorations of *Ecocriticism and Italy* are conducted, and this is also the reason why an essential part of the title of our volume, along with "Italy" and "ecocriticism," is the "and" connecting these two terms.

As environmental humanities scholars, we are trained to think that places should not be taken literally as they appear on maps: maps themselves are never neutral or innocent, being always the result of ideologically constructed topographies of power. At the same time, there are places that can gather experiences, dynamics, and symbols as to also enlighten the life of other places, of other collectives: places that, like Jorge Luis Borges's Aleph, are "points in the space that contain all points" (Borges 2000: 126). These places are at once territory and map, individual sites and cognitive instruments. And this is what "our" Italy will be for ecocriticism. A combination of a critique and a country, *Ecocriticism and Italy* attempts to develop theoretical keys that transcend the untimely parochialism of fixed borders and immutable identities. Our world is pervious and fluid, and so must be the notions that help us to read and to describe its ecologies of ideas and bodies.

This is a perspective that has constantly oriented my research. By writing about the Po Valley as a "necroregion," about Naples's "waste land" and its narrative democracy, about Seveso's "posthuman" dioxin, or about the Mediterranean as a site of elemental and biopolitical encounters, I have tried to draw attention to the fact that places, in all their complexity, can be assumed as generative of categories, and that these categories enrich and engage our disciplinary debate as a whole. Following these lines, the intention animating this book is not simply to offer ecocritical interpretations of Italian authors or sceneries, but rather to conceptually *frame* Italy *and* ecocriticism together, expounding notions that could be used on broader latitudes. *Ecocriticism and*

Italy is thus meant to sketch a map (one among the innumerable possible ones) of the landscapes of bodies and imagination through which a specific place becomes "all the places." By way of this map we can finally see how the specific, individual stories of that first place mirror, involve, and meet those of countless other places and beings, just as it happens for the Niger Delta when observed via the lens of Rob Nixon's "slow violence" or to the American country villages in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. These singular places are at once a metaphor for recurring patterns, an interpretive key, and pieces in a puzzle which appears only when all its parts, near and far, are connected.

But what does it mean to "give a voice" to Italy's "bodily narratives," and in which sense can we say that landscapes are texts? A text is something that can be read: a book, an inscription on a wall, a musical score, a poem, a picture, a film, a theater play. But "text" can also be something else: for example, the *material texture* of meanings, experiences, processes, and substances that make the life of places and beings. A text, in this sense, emerges from the encounter of actions, discourses, imagination, and physical forces that congeal in material forms. Landscapes are texts, and so are bodies. They are texts, because through them we read embodied narratives of social and power relations, biological balances and imbalances, and the concrete shaping of spaces, territories, human, and nonhuman life.

That Italy's embodied narratives begin or coincide with the natural-cultural features of its territory is obvious. This happens here just like in any other part of the world. Maybe more than other countries, however, Italy is almost inevitably synonymous with its landscape. Whether one has in mind the traditional representations of picturesque natural sceneries and classical architecture, or the antipastoral settings of urban waste crises, postindustrial deserts, and contaminated watersheds, Italy *talks* through its territories and ecologies. It is perceived and narrated by means of these texts. What these texts tell us, if considered beyond the usual clichés, is that there is no such thing as a "standard" or "canonical" Italian landscape. Italy's landscapes are ecologically hybrid and environmentally ambivalent, halfway between unspeakable beauty and complete abandon. There are landscapes with factories in the middle of protected areas, landscapes of social fragmentation, landscapes of struggles and contradictions, often articulating political, cultural, ecological crises.[1]

But these landscapes of crisis are also powerfully interlaced with landscapes of imagination. From the very combination of beauty and abandon, violence and liveliness, literary authors, theater performers, activists, photographers, artists, and filmmakers, have developed strategies to actively respond to this crisis. Their responses, co-emerging with the energies at work in the landscapes themselves, are at once counter-narratives about the status quo and creations of new ecologies: ecologies of words, of ideas, and of new possible material realities.

This ensemble of interacting energies also reflects the style of the book: *Ecocriticism and Italy* in fact is not a neutral textual analysis, but a *narrative* research in which the author reflects her own experience of the texts she has analyzed. This is something that clearly resonates with the glorious tradition of "narrative scholarship" inside ecocriticism.[2] Accordingly, the goal is not just an insertion (or, if you wish, an intrusion) of the individual into the bigger picture, but rather an experimental reflection on the practice of our work as ecocritics, namely, as interpreters of ecologies of matter and ideas in their various contexts. In this volume, however, the conceptual grounds of such a stylistic choice depend more patently on the nature of the analyzed text. When the text we interpret is a material one, like when we take our country as a text, we cannot ignore that this text possesses a particular trait: it contains the interpreter herself. There is, in other words, no neutrality in experiencing, knowing, and telling a story: if, as Karen Barad says, "*we are part of that nature that we seek to understand*," the ways we enact this understanding "contribute to, and are part of, the phenomena that we describe" (Barad 2007: 26, emphasis in the original).

The theory behind this whole vision is material ecocriticism, an epistemological-critical project meant to both redesign the category of text and reframe the interpreter's role in the becoming of the examined reality. As Serpil Oppermann and I have explained in previous studies, material ecocriticism heeds the stories inbuilt in matter—in all matter, from cells to ecosystems, from historic landscapes to gendered bodies and their social constructions. All of these material things are creatively expressive: they are "storied matter" in which collectives of human and nonhuman actors intersect and whose existence is in mutual dependence and determination.[3]

But material ecocriticism is not only about the agency and textuality of matter. It is also about the permeability of matter and imagination. In other

words, it is not only about how matter is a text, but also about how texts (literary, artistic, and critical texts) are matter and *do* matter, and how they add new layers to a society's ecology of mind, thus supplementing its ethical and ontological vocabulary with new words.[4] In so doing, material ecocriticism acts on our visions and cognitive categories. This is exactly what *Ecocriticism and Italy*—putting that theory into practice—wishes to do. By examining both material and cultural texts, the role of the critic will be that of shaping narrative paths of understanding, "intra-acting" not only with the interpreted subjects but also with the potential readers of both this book and this reality.

This is, after all, the main aspiration of ecocriticism: to intervene, to interfere, to be part of something that changes alongside with our awareness of it, becoming more and more eloquent, and hence not only changing *in* our perception, but also changing the way we perceive things. This is the continual tension between the individual and the whole, between resistance and liberation.

Ecology, resistance, and liberation

The chief categories used in this book are among the most relevant keywords of Italian history: resistance and liberation. In proposing them as the leitmotivs of our discourse, however, my purpose is to stretch their ethical-political connotations to the discourse of the environmental humanities, thus expanding ecocriticism's lexicon. In *Ecocriticism and Italy*, therefore, "resistance" and "liberation" are not left to their conventional human-socio-centered domain, but are challenged and amplified. They are gently taken from the hands of human subjects and shared with the environment, the landscape, and all their eco-social bodies.

The reason why we need a more-than-human practice of resistance and liberation is evident. The harmful intersections of contamination, criminal activities, and political life, tell us how dangerous it has become to ignore that the landscapes in which we live are—at all levels—permeable to each other. A dying ecosystem, a disrupted territory, the increasing cancer rates in places where vulnerable people share the same fate of vulnerable land and life forms: all these phenomena are eloquent in expressing the way the personal

(namely, the human) is constantly mingled with the impersonal (namely, an extended nonhuman). In this dimension of interlacing players and presences, recognizing impersonal stories—stories of land, of things, of hybridity, of processes—is as important as recognizing personal stories, stories of people. These impersonal stories embody and articulate the dynamics of resistance and liberation that characterize our life. Now more than ever, *the impersonal is political*.

Narratives, either material or cultural, are forms of reaction and resistance. They create that interstice that allows the personal and the impersonal to merge into one another, and to find their way out in the world: to be acknowledged, recognized, socialized. To really see the stories of the impersonal, we do not have to rely merely on "the language of politics," as Italo Calvino calls it, or on the words imposed by the forces that possess the "power of legitimate naming," as Pierre Bourdieu would say.[5] All we have to do is to heed the tacit voices of the world: environments, landscapes, molecules, foods, bodies, and all "naturecultures," in Donna Haraway's sense. A literature, an art, and a criticism that are able to transform these unexpressed voices into stories—into *our* stories—are not only ways to resist. They are a practice of liberation.

Another key element of this discourse is more properly tied to the social and political ecology of this country. As it will appear from all the chapters of *Ecocriticism and Italy*, we will never be able to understand the complexity of Italy's material narratives if we do not filter this understanding through the prism of environmental justice.[6] The environmental justice outlook establishes the connections between the wellbeing of the land and the wellbeing of its inhabitants, as well as between the destruction of the land and the discrimination and violence to which its inhabitants are subjected. In Italy, the threshold of discrimination and violence depends not so much on ethnic group, social class, or the color of one's skin, but rather on corrupted uses of power. Talking of environmental justice in Italy means talking of *pollution in the use of power*, whether political power or an eco-comprehensive Foucaultian "biopower," namely, a power over people (and other beings) in their biological sphere.

In Italy, this kind of pollution is, to paraphrase Ulrich Beck, more "democratic" than elsewhere: from a toxified (and politically unprotected) environment, one can die in the more opulent North as well as in the less

"developed" South; in Naples, plagued by illegal waste, as well as in Venice, with its (literally) breathtaking historic heritage and petrochemical factory. Many of these emergences are connected to the criminal activities of the so-called ecomafia, but distinctions in this discourse are not easily drawn. In numerous cases, due to insufficient legal enforcement or to transversal complicities, illicit practices have been not only tolerated, but even supported by laws. Ecomafia, in fact, has a pendant in Italy's industrial politics and "state capitalism," elements that often appear in this book. If ecomafia destroys landscapes with unlawful buildings and contaminates Naples's bodies (Chapter 1), industrial politics and "state capitalism" created a petrochemical factory in the Venetian Lagoon (Chapter 2), the biocidal Cengio's ACNA at the border of Piedmont and Liguria (Chapter 4), the post-seismic industrialization of mountain areas in the depressed southern Italy (Chapter 3), a gigantic dam under a collapsing mountain in Vajont, and other eco-social bombs such as Bagnoli's Italsider in the Bay of Naples, or Taranto's ILVA, to cite just few examples.

Although profoundly different from one another, ecomafia and these industrial politics have two things in common: the first is a misinterpretation of the material text of reality, taken not as a dynamic and porous complex of elements and life, but as a mere background for their activities; the second is their capacity to reconfigure the categories of environmental justice discourse, whose canons—from Bullard to Martinez Alier and Rob Nixon—are constituted by class, ethnic group, and race.[7] In Italy, ecomafia and industrial "state capitalism" have expanded the environmental justice discourse beyond the "environmentalism of the poor," coloring it with traits of social, cultural, and ethnic transversality. I am not saying that in Italy environmental racism or classism are nonexistent, but rather that no citizen is really immune from falling into the entanglements of *material and discursive* forms of pollution. Nobody's personal stories are really safe from mingling with the stories of the impersonal, whether this impersonal is chemical pollution or polluted uses of power. The point is how to see all this.

The "resisting" and "liberating" function of ecocriticism is therefore that of countering any form of misinterpretation of the texts of reality, which is instrumental to a self-validation of polluted powers, and of contributing to enact practices of *cognitive justice*. I take this notion in a slightly different

way from the one in which it is more frequently deployed. Cognitive justice in my discourse does not refer to the recognition of subaltern paradigms of science or the counter-hegemonic plurality of knowledge forms, as theorized by important postcolonial studies scholars, such as Shiv Visvanathan (1997), or Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007). I argue here for a more radical form of justice based on the right to know, and to choose accordingly. Like in many other countries, layers of missed cognitive justice in Italy involve the health of the land, as well as that of working places (Chapters 2 and 4). They entail lack of information about the levels of risk to which citizens are subjected in their living, the state of apprehension in which people find themselves not only in catastrophic and unpredictable situations such as earthquakes or landslides, but also in cases of food, water, and air contamination.

Reading the bodies of people, substances, and lands in their material connections as part of a collective narrative can provide evidence useful to confront this lack of cognitive justice, also enabling us to protect the nonhuman others involved in these dynamics. And reading all these bodies *together* with artistic and literary responses is a way to give our understanding a dimension of universality that enlightens and transcends the experience's situatedness. All this constitutes an *interpretive and material* practice of resistance and liberation.

In order to accomplish this task, taking Italy as a starting point, however, ecocriticism must clear up post-Arcadian stereotypes—whether positive or negative—about this country: journalistic platitudes such as "Italy breaks your heart" (Bruni 2013), gloomy litanies tied to the idea of Italy as the "mafia land," or romantic clichés modeled on Grand Tour experiences, à la "Do you know the land, where the lemon-trees grow," sung by Mignon in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. Italy does break your heart, but it can also restore the material imagination of its places by way of creative responses and cognitive strategies. In this land, lemons grow from a ground contaminated by mafia and bad politics, but mafia and bad politics are not all and cannot be all.

Ecocriticism and Italy will try to see things, give them names, and trace their stories. If narratives are a form of resistance, to understand these interconnected stories is a possible path to liberation.

A map, postcards, and a compass

If the map of Italy's "storied matter" sketched in this book is one among the innumerable possible ones, the episodes you will find here cannot be more than fragments of this big narrative corpus. In my choice—which, like all responsible choices, is necessarily subjective, biased, and limited—I have tried to privilege stories that connect with each other, creating a sort of plot in the "mind" of this place. This produces a certain density in the fabric of this book. Therefore, instead of offering conventional summaries, I have decided to use this last paragraph for my final "credits." In mapping the places and voices that allowed me to narrate these stories, I provide you with some postcards and a compass.

The first postcard comes from Naples. It marks a beginning, because the places I see are the ones of my roots: Naples's porous ground, its ancient streets and walls, Mount Vesuvius and the volcanic landscape of Pompeii and Torre Annunziata. The stories I interpret here come from the city's natures and matters and from the lava upsurge of AD 79; they come from absent bodies that become eloquent over time; from the thick trans-corporeal entanglements of the present, overshadowed by ecomafia's threat. The voices that speak together with mine are those of Goethe, Lucretius, Curzio Malaparte, visual artists and visionary photographers, brave historians, and environmental activists. You can also sense here veiled presences of theorists such as Stacy Alaimo, Jeffrey Cohen, Nancy Tuana, Karen Barad, David Abram, Cate Sandilands, Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Jane Bennett, Elena Past, Serpil Oppermann, and the many others that influence my way of seeing things. Your compass points at a keyword: porosity.

In the second postcard, you will recognize the Venetian Lagoon, and here you spot both Venice and Marghera, its eerie industrial alter ego. At a first glance, the picture may appear circumscribed, but the setting is larger, as you will see. The stories you find here come from the "geological unconscious" of this *hubristic* and delicate place, from the betrayed textuality of its amphibious natures, from its suffering elemental balances, and from the cells of the petrochemical workers. The voices that speak are those of Calvino, Goethe, Borges, Felice Casson, Thomas Mann, Andrea Zanzotto, Marco Paolini, and the innumerable invisible (and impersonal) presences that are in and around us,

whenever we wear, say, PVC boots. Here, too, you sense discreet companions that join the company—Wendy Wheeler and Heather Sullivan, for example—and also, silently present, Rob Nixon and Ursula Heise. The compass indicates two coordinates: cognitive justice and material textuality.

The third postcard displays the rubble of three earthquakes. The setting is multiple: we see Irpinia (in internal Campania), Belice (in northwestern Sicily), and L'Aquila (in Abruzzo). The temporality is multiple, too. Geological time intersects here with the punctuality of the events, respectively taking place in 1980, 1968, and 2009. But the *longue durée* of the consequences of these seismic events opens another window on the manifold time (and violence) of environmental emergences. The voices that speak in this story are debris, abandoned places, the victims seen and unseen, old houses, age-old places, dispersed communities, new houses, new places, and brand-new biopolitically induced isolations. There are philosophers under and around the ruins: Benedetto Croce and Ernesto De Martino. There are economists: Manlio Rossi Doria. There are writers, but not that many. There are, instead, many artists, too many to be listed here. There is even a "placeologist": Franco Arminio. There is a filmmaker: Sabina Guzzanti. There is a Neapolitan photographer: Mario Amura. There is an Australian who dances with disasters: Kate Rigby. And there I am, too, as you see, in very good company. The compass indicates here a keyword, apocalypse, and an artwork's title: *Show Your Wound*, by Joseph Beuys.

The fourth postcard is gorgeous, because it comes from the spectacular vineyards of my Piedmont. The things it tells you, however, are not all happy. These grapes and this agricultural landscape speak indeed stories of violence, of war, of blood, of women, of defeated things and beings. The postcard also tells you of the factories that poisoned ecosystems and people, and of the time it takes for asbestos to settle in one's lungs. But it also introduces to you someone who decided to give voice to this "defeated world": Nuto Revelli. Through his "collective" work, you are able to see the way narrative resistance transforms into potential forms of creative liberation, coming from "slow violence" to Slow Food. You will meet Carlo Petrini, Rob Nixon (this time less silent), Priscilla Wald, Hubert Zapf, and the spirit of food and environmental justice advocates, Joni Adamson for example. While the compass points at the title, we will consider together the developments of Italian environmental laws over a glass of Nebbiolo wine.

The postcards are over. And at this point, for a moment, the scattered fragments of this big bodily narrative appear together, as if they were the restored tiles of a picture that might now be seen, the chapters of a story that might now be read. If interpretation is a way to do justice to reality, our exploration of Italy's text is intended to partake in a temporary restoration of meaning, and this restoration is itself a strategy of resistance and liberation. Ecocriticism is this, too: a dream of narrative justice, which advocates for the political dimension of the personal as well as the impersonal, so as to give reality the chance to resonate in all its chords, from all its angles.

Notes

1 On the topic of Italian hybrid landscapes, see Seger 2015. Although Seger's book came out too late for me to include it in this discussion, it certainly constitutes a valid interlocutor for *Ecocriticism and Italy*.

2 Scott Slovic is the most prominent exponent of this lineage. See, among his many works, *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility*. Joni Adamson's *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* and John Elder's *Pilgrimage to Vallombrosa: From Vermont to Italy in the Footsteps of George Perkins Marsh* also deserve an important mention. For a connection between material ecocriticism and narrative scholarship, see Iovino and Oppermann 2014a: 9.

3 Essential partners in this conversation have been Jeffrey Cohen and Lowell Duckert, who developed a model confluent with material ecocriticism in their works on ecomaterialism, "elemental ecocriticism," and "prismatic ecology." See Cohen 2013a and 2015a, and Cohen and Duckert 2015.

4 On this point, see in particular Iovino 2012a: 61–6. About the theoretical foundations and features of material ecocriticism, see Iovino and Oppermann 2012, 2014a, and 2014b.

5 In *The Uses of Literature*, Italo Calvino writes that literature "gives a voice to whatever is without a voice, [...] especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude" (Calvino 1986: 98). On the "power of legitimate naming," see Bourdieu 1989.

6 For the application of environmental justice categories to the Italian context, see Armiero 2014a; Armiero and D'Alisa 2012; S. Barca 2012; Iovino 2009 and 2013.

7 I refer here to some of the classics of environmental justice: Joan Martinez Alier's *The Environmentalism of the Poor* (2003), Robert Bullard's *Unequal Protection* (1990), and Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). The application of the environmental justice paradigm to ecocriticism has been pioneered by Joni Adamson (see Adamson 2001; Adamson et al. 2002). Implicit in the approach of this book, Adamson's studies have been a major source of inspiration for my own work.

1

Bodies of Naples

A Journey in the Landscapes of Porosity

In the heart of the city of Naples there is a place with a curious name: *Largo Corpo di Napoli*. This little square opens up like an oyster at a point where the *decumani*, the Greek main streets, become a tangle of narrow medieval lanes and heavy gray-and-white buildings. Like an oyster, this square has a pearl: an ancient statue of the Nile, popularly known as *Corpo di Napoli*, the body of Naples. The story of this statue is peculiar. Dating back to the second or third centuries, when it was erected to mark the presence of an Egyptian colony in the city, the statue disappeared for a long time and was rediscovered in the twelfth century. Its head was missing, and the presence of children lying at its breasts led people to believe that it represented Parthenope, the virgin nymph to whom the foundation of the city is mythically attributed. In 1657 the statue was restored, and a more suitable male head made it clear that the reclining figure symbolized the Egyptian river and the children personifications of its tributaries. In spite of evidence and philology, however, for the people the sculpture remained the symbol of their city's body. In this body, as sometimes happens in local rituals and legends, the boundaries of gender roles, like those of matter and spirit, present and past, are blurred and shifting.

Not far from the *Body of Naples*, concealed in a side lane, the city offers its corporeality again, this time in the overflowing baroque splendors of the San Severo Chapel. Here, other bodies appear: bodies of marble, like the *Veiled Christ* and the *Veiled Modesty*, two emphatic eighteenth-century sculptures in which the presence of a shroud makes the corporeal dimension even more naked and exposed, and, stunningly displayed in a scientific cabinet, a man and a pregnant woman, known as "anatomic machines." These bodies, whose



Corpo di Napoli (2012). Courtesy of Christian Arpaia.

circulatory systems and internal organs have been carefully reconstructed with wax using real skeletons as a basis, have also been for centuries the subjects of legends and popular tales about alchemical transubstantiations and mysterious practices that would preserve matter from corruption.

In a few square meters, there is an accumulation of bodies: of mythical bodies alluding to the elemental forces and intermediate divinities presiding over the birth of the city, of bodies used as "anatomical machines" for proto-scientific experiments, of marble bodies covered with marble veils to give the illusion of mystic weightlessness, and, most of all, of living human bodies. With three million residents in its metropolitan area, a volcanic region in coastal Campania, Naples is indeed one of the most densely populated Italian cities, and, within this overpopulated city, this quarter is one of the most filled with people, their emerging dynamics, their stories.[1] And these stories continue far from the center, becoming alarmingly dangerous in the outskirts, crisscrossed today by the magmatic trajectories of the ecomafia's criminal traffic.

This chapter is about some of the many bodies of Naples and its turbulent surroundings and about how memories and meanings are materially carved on to them. These are bodies of humans and nonhumans, hybrid bodies that coalesce with the materiality of places and natural forces, interacting with flows of substances, imagination, and discourses. Via these reciprocal transformations, the lively matter of these bodies becomes a template for the stories of this region, a narrative agency, a "storied matter."

Interpreting bodies—the bodies of Naples—as texts conveying the signs and wounds expressed by material forces and collective visions, we will shed light on the complexity of levels, at once ecological, political, telluric, artistic, cultural, that craft the life of this place. In the examination of three *tableaux*, taken from archaeological research, literature, and finally from the land itself, I will illustrate the Neapolitan territory as a fluid ensemble of forces in mutual determination in which every part congeals as a nexus of ongoing narratives, showing how deeply and tangibly human bodies and minds are "ensconced in material environments, which shape us just as vividly as we shape them" (Sullivan 2012: 528). Our three scenes constitute the elements of a "Vesuvian antipastoral," a non-romantic journey across a pulsating and difficult landscape, in which the world and its significances are continuously

emerging through one another and continuously returning into the abyss of each other's porosity. In this dimension, made of hollows and matter coming from the recesses of the earth, of consciousness, or of our own cells, the reality is always a *mise en abyme* of itself. It is a fractal, a holographic replication and combination of agencies; these agencies materialize in bodies, and these bodies, in turn, materialize in stories. We will read these stories as bio-narratives of trauma, resilience, war, and resistance coming from a land that, expressing its voice through all of its bodies, is urgently struggling for its liberation.

A (pervious) frame: Porosity

Like many German intellectuals and artists of his age, Walter Benjamin visited Naples several times during the 1920s. In a short memoir he wrote with Asja Lacis, the Brechtian actress with whom he was in love, the city is described with excited impressionism and defined with a recurrent adjective: "porous." In their Mitteleuropean eyes, Naples's porous texture involved forms and styles, gestures and behaviors, relationships and places.[2] Most of all, though, the city looked porous to them because of its predominant building material: a pale-yellow, spongy, and sandy stone called "toof" (in Italian, *tufo*). Naples's toof, whose scientific name is *Ignimbrite campana*—literally, Campania's "fiery rock dust cloud" (from the Latin *ignis*, "fire," and *imber*, "rain")—is a sedimentary formation of pyroclastic rock, resulting from deposits of ash and lapilli explosions, and lava flows.[3] Toof exists in huge concentrations in the Campi Flegrei (literally, "Flaming Fields," from the Greek *phlégo*, "burn"), a vast volcanic area delimited at the southeast by Mount Vesuvius. In the middle of this land, suspended between the sea and the volcano, and erected on toof, is Naples, a porous, volcanic city built up with porous, volcanic rock.

Easy to work, light, resistant, and very abundant, toof is practically everywhere in Naples. Indeed, this rock is so copious that it has been used for almost every palace, church, house, fisherman's cave, or storage room fabricated here prior to the advent of reinforced concrete. Permeating the very soil of Naples, toof is also an immediately available material, and this creates one of the city's fascinating paradoxes. The majority of the buildings, in fact, lie

directly on the caves from where the construction materials were taken, giving the feeling of a city rising from its own womb. Thus, if Venice is erected upon an underwater forest of innumerable trees, Naples is founded on hollows, its bodies literally staying at the bottom of burning fields and living in houses and streets fabricated with volcanic rocks, whether toof or other kinds of lava formations. Developing in a vast network of subterranean tunnels, these hollows—used as catacombs, storage spaces, domestic dumps, and, during the Second World War, as antiaircraft shelters—have filtered for centuries the matter and emotions of the city atop. Also today, with its underground mineral agency, this buried vacuum continues playing an active role in the city's life. A place of worship or a curiosity for tourists, these tunnels in fact are there to remind us that there is an invisible city below our feet, and that this subterranean anti- (or pre-)Naples breathes along with the one we see above.

Although intended to be more picturesque than scientific, Benjamin and Lacis's definition of Naples as a "porous city" is very effective. Naples is porous in many ways. It is spatiotemporally porous—a city upon other cities, where traces of the Greek and Roman settlements, preserved in the underfoot layers, systematically overflow onto streets and corners, sharing transversal portions of space with medieval tribunals, Renaissance palaces, or baroque churches. Naples is porous because of its overall volcanic aura, a pervious agency that permeates the city's history. Indeed, eruptions have marked Naples's life for millennia. The last upsurge, in 1944, almost coincided with the entry of the Allied forces in the city. And telluric porosity also fills the city's cultural imagination: to the many intellectuals and artists who, like Benjamin or Goethe long before him, stopped here on their Grand Tour, Mount Vesuvius's lush and sulfurous landscape provided a vibrant and engulfing experience of "Plutonic" sublime. Courageously climbing to the mountain's cone with the painter Johann Heinrich Tischbein during an eruption, Goethe was struck by this nature "which again and again destroys itself and declares war to any sense of beauty," while at the same time luring with "the irresistible fascination of a rattlesnake" (Goethe 1970: 192, 145). In those very years, the majestic and dreadful view of the erupting volcano had also begun to appear in the paintings of another illustrious traveler, Joseph Wright of Derby, who had visited the region a decade before Goethe. The encounter with this absorbing and mesmerizing landscape deeply impregnated the British painter's mind,

re-emerging to sight in over thirty works specifically dedicated to the exploding Vesuvius (Egerton 1991).

But, examined more in depth, the porosity of these places replicates the porosity of all bodies taken as sites of "interchanges and transits" (Alaimo 2010: 2), crossroads of agencies, and "congregational" entities (Bennett 2010: 34): permeable and compound systems, in which the alternation of plenum and void is the very condition of every possible existing thing. If, from a physical viewpoint, void is literally the site where particles of matter can move, combine, and carry on activity, from a more general perspective, all possible bodies emerge out of this interplay of emptiness and density. And it is this interplay that makes all bodies, from atoms and molecules to assemblages and collectives of humans and nonhumans, permeable to the world. This porosity occurs at many levels, both material and semiotic, allowing transformations, metabolism, and flows of matter, energy, and information.

It is interesting to notice that, before being proven by biologists and physicists, the permeability of matter had been a cornerstone of natural philosophy (more notably, of atomism) for millennia. In the first century BC, the Epicurean poet Lucretius, who lived and philosophized in Herculaneum, at the foothills of Mount Vesuvius, wrote in his lyrical treatise on *The Nature of Things* that "however solid things appear [...] even these are porous":

> In a cave of rocks the seep of moisture trickles
> And the whole place weeps its fat blobs of tears.
> Food is dispersed all through a creature's body;
> Young trees grow tall and yield their fruit in season,
> Drawing their sustenance from the lowest roots
> Through trunks and branches; voices penetrate
> Walls and closed doors; the seep of stiffening cold
> Permeates bone. Phenomena like these
> Would be impossible but for empty spaces
> Where particles can pass. (Lucretius 1969: 30)

Filtering through time and visions, these ideas resonate with a passage from *The Fold*, where, commenting on Leibniz's ontology, Gilles Deleuze writes that matter "offers an infinitely porous, spongy, or cavernous texture without emptiness, caverns endlessly contained in other caverns: no matter how small,

each body contains a world pierced with irregular passages" (Deleuze 1993: 5). This description seems to fit Naples's reality perfectly.

Many centuries after Lucretius and Leibniz, today we know that every body, every corporeal entity, is intrinsically open, intrinsically "of and in the world" (Tuana 2008: 198). It is, as Levi Bryant has written, "a heterogeneous and complex network of entities that is itself an entity or unity," a singularity that, in order to be what it is, has to be microscopically vast and to contain multitudes. Bodies, in other words, "are more like sponges than marbles"—also because, considered in their inner structure, "even marbles are a sort of sponge" (Bryant 2012: n.p.). Like every transformative or metabolic process of the world, thus, corporeality is always already open and trans-corporeal.[4] This trans-corporeality expresses itself in the way material substances interfere and intermingle with each other, determining the world as a site of ongoing hybridizations, from evolutionary processes to environmentally related illness. Food consumption, too, as Lucretius reminds us, is a way through which bodies are reciprocally transformed. Eating is a mutual hybridization of bodily matters, and so are sweating, the chlorophyllian synthesis of plants, the physicochemical transformation of atoms into molecules with properties of their own, and the flowing of lava from the recesses of the earth to the "open" world up above.

All these are examples of the world's metabolic porosity, accurately expressed by the German word for "metabolism," *Stoffwechsel*: literally, an exchange of matter. This is also what determines, for instance, communication or reproduction; the presence of interstices in bodily structures is the very condition for the outer elements to interact with the body itself, and thus to make intimacy possible: "it is because bodies are characterized by this porosity that intimacy is an intimacy with a world beyond the boundaries of their membranes. […] Entities flow through each other in all sorts of ways" (Bryant 2012: n.p.).

As bodies are what they are via their permeable boundaries (membranes that cause the flows of energy and matter), so, too, bigger entities and formations follow the same dynamics. A city, for example, is a porous body inhabited by other porous bodies, a mineral-vegetable-animal aggregate of porous bodies. Following the patterns of intra-action, cities are compounds of matter and energy in mutual transformation with human and nonhuman

beings, living and nonliving matter, thus participating in the world's "geochoreographies" (Cohen 2015a: 188). A convincing model for this porous geochoreography is provided by Manuel De Landa, who writes: "From the point of view of energetic and catalytic flows, human societies are very much like lava flows; and human-made structures (mineralized cities and institutions) are very much like mountains and rocks: accumulations of materials hardened and shaped by historical processes" (De Landa 1997: 55). There is a substantial—ontological and historical—continuity in the formation of cities and volcanic rocks. The rhythms of "mineralization" and "catalysis" of cities might differ from those of geological structures, but they are part of the unceasing morphing process that involves organisms, structures, genes, languages, or ideas: "Living creatures and their inorganic counterparts share a crucial dependence on intense flows of energy and materials. [...] Our organic bodies are, in this sense, nothing but temporary coagulations in these flows" (De Landa 1997: 104). Seen in this light, porosity is not only the basis of change, growth, and decay both on a geological and a human level, but the very condition of history: of a history that is not a linear succession of events,



Città vegetale (2012). Courtesy of Christian Arpaia.

but rather a path emerging from the fluxes of matter and energy in which our organic bodies are "nothing but temporary coagulations," as De Landa says.

In the vast landscape of porosity, cognition occupies an important part, too. As Varela, Thompson, and Rosch explain, cognition "depends on the kind of experience that comes from having a body with various sensorimotor capacities"—capacities that "are themselves embedded in a more encompassing biological, psychological, and cultural context" (Varela et al. 1993: p. 173). As a set of embodied practices, knowledge consists "in the interface between mind, society, and culture, rather than in one or even in all of them" (Varela et al. 1993: 179). Knowledge—human and nonhuman informational interchange with the world—is a form of porosity; it is the way the world enters and conditions habits of living, thus determining the way living beings *in-habit* the world. To say that knowledge is "embodied" means that the world acts together with bodies, becoming sedimented in and filtered through cognitive practices. This is what N. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman*, describes as a process of cognitive "embodiment." Every cognitive experience, whether an "incorporated practice" ("an action that is encoded into bodily memory by repeated performances until it becomes habitual"; Hayles 1999: 199) or the enactive processes of "embodied knowledge," is rooted in the mutual porosity of bodies and world. Embodied knowledge, in particular, is a process and a flux, "a mode of learning which is [...] different from that deriving from cogitation alone" (Hayles 1999: 201), and therefore "contextual, enmeshed with the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture" (Hayles 1999: 196). In other words, knowledge comes from the give-and-take between bodies and the world. It materializes the porous exchange of inside and outside, the progressive becoming-together of bodies and the world.

This discloses another important dimension of this permeability, which is also discursive and semiotic: the flow of information and discursive practices through bodies. Phenomena such as gender, sexuality, class, social practices, *and their narratives* are filtered through this porosity as forms of an "emergent interplay" of natural-cultural factors. This is the key of Alaimo's trans-corporeality and of what Nancy Tuana, following Alfred North Whitehead, calls an "interactionist ontology": an ontology in which the social is considered in its materiality, in strict combination with the agency of the natural, thus

challenging essentialist visions and their normative constructions (see Tuana 2008: 188). "Porosity" means here the permeability not only "between our flesh and the flesh of the world we are of and in" (Tuana 2008: 198), but also between bodies and the discursive worlds in which they are located: bodies "produc[e] culture at the same time that culture produces [...] bod[ies]" (Hayles 1999: 200). This "emergent interplay," or, in Barad's compelling term, intra-action of matter, discourses, and cognitions, shows that there are no clear-cut boundaries separating "the natural from the human-constructed, the biological from the cultural, genes from their environments, the material from the semiotic" (Tuana 2008: 198), but that every body is a crossing of flesh and meanings, a unique node in the stories of matter.[5]

The landscape of Naples and its region is not only materially and historically porous, alternating hollows and density in "a mosaic of ecological and semiotic processes" (Farina 2006: 64), but also, with its co-emerging bodies, epitomizes such a vision. Being themselves players in the making of the world, all of these bodies are in fact enactive and cognitive filters for agencies, which are natural and social, human and nonhuman, visible or invisible, foreseen or unpredictable. Their narrative porosity becomes therefore both the point where the world enters bodies and the point from which bodies deliver their stories to the world. It is this very junction, made of material, social, and cognitive mergings, that we are now heeding.

Tableau I: (Absent) bodies

An interesting chapter in this story of bodies and porosity is to be found a few miles south of Naples, displayed in the dusty showcases of Pompeii's *antiquarium*. It tells us about the eruption that in AD 79 affected a vast territory at the foothills of Mount Vesuvius comprising the cities of Herculaneum, Pompeii, and Oplontis, and modifying the life and landscape of the Neapolitan area.

Forgotten for many centuries, the site of ancient Pompeii had been rediscovered (and severely plundered) by the Bourbons, Naples's Spanish sovereigns, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and finally identified in 1763. Over time, many bodies have emerged from the excavations. These were bodies that, covered with volcanic debris, had left their imprints in

the solidified lava, so that one could see "the full form of the dead, their clothing, and their hair" (Beard 2008: 6). But similarly eloquent were other kinds of bodies: the absent ones. Here, again, porosity is part of the picture. As cyberneticians know, information is not only embodied in the *presence* of the object, in its material density; absent objects can also convey a message and a meaning. In other words, the void also possesses a semiotic dimension. Similar to Naples's buildings emerging from the hollows of the city, Pompeii's bodies emerged from their own absence, from the hollows they left in the petrified ash after decomposing. These absent bodies started materializing around the 1860s, via a technique developed to obtain casts of wooden doors, shutters, furniture, and other perishable objects. Like a photonegative, this void was charged with information; combined with plaster, it made it possible to look into that historical moment, literally giving a face to the human and nonhuman victims of the eruption.

From an archaeological viewpoint, the combination of excavated and "photonegative" findings, of plenum and void, constitutes a site full of narratives: narratives about social roles and gender practices, about what Bruno Latour calls assemblages and collectives, about human and nonhuman agents in ancient everyday life. Reading into the stratified natural-cultural ecologies of this place, the archaeological research has opened windows on more-than-human realities both in larger visions and in little but meaningful segments. From the many examples that can be quoted, one is the discovery of small breads left in an oven where they were being baked when the upsurge started. Baked twice, both by human and by volcanic heat, these breads remained suspended in the twilight zone where intentionality is overcome by the agency of things, thus turning into an involuntary *mise en abyme* of the town swallowed by lava. Another compelling snapshot on this world of confluent forces is offered by the cast of a guard dog, suffocated by the ash and pumice in the hopeless attempt to get rid of his chain. With his bronze studded collar and the excruciating fear still visible in his (absent) face, the dog shared the same fate of a man, probably a slave, who died while trying to unshackle his ankles from the iron bonds that tied them. Like material texts emerging from the void, these plaster casts render the agony of human and nonhuman bodies in a pitiless combination with the power of the elements and of socially constructed bindings.

But, following the tracks of porosity, I would like to focus now on another narrative, complementary to the one collected by archaeologists. In this narrative, the alternation of plenum and void—in terms of bodies, memory, and cognition—sheds light on the "emergent interplay" of agencies at work in the event of AD 79.

The surprise inscribed in these bodies is a key element of the story. When the German philosopher Karl Löwith saw the plaster casts in 1924, he commented:

> The view of these people—surprised and immobilized by nature in the last acts of their life—is compelling. The fixity of their traits recalls the look of certain death masks. But the faces of these Pompeians, buried by lava, do not know the tranquil calm of the dead. Death took them in the middle of life, not leaving them, so to speak, the time of dying. (Löwith 2000: 63)

Although a perceptible astonishment might be obvious on the face of whoever is struck by a natural cataclysm, in Pompeii the people's surprise reveals another important element of this story of presence/absence, density, and void. Considered on a cognitive level, the volcanic eruption is a breach, an epistemic rupture in the mind of this place. For a long time Vesuvius was believed to be a mountain. Some Roman writers had commented on its similarity to Mount Etna, an active volcano in Sicily, or conjectured about Vesuvius's being a volcano. Strabo, for example, had written that the summit "shows pore-like cavities in masses of rock that [...] [look] as though they had been eaten out by fire; and hence one might infer that in earlier times this district was on fire and had craters of fire" (Strabo 1917–32: 453). However, Vesuvius had been dormant for eight hundred years: the memory of its agency had simply disappeared from the general narratives about this place—thus, the epistemic (and physical) shock. As Jeffrey Cohen says, nature's elemental forces "surprise and then confound" (Cohen 2013a: xxiv).

In her essay "Landscape, Memory, and Forgetting," Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands has expressed inspiring considerations on the ties between memory, body, and landscape. Drawing from the medical research about Alzheimer's disease and from David Abram's ecophenomenology, she writes:

> Remembrance—the act of embodying an act or object or place or concept in some portion of the brain or another—is not solely a question of the

> remembering subject. Both the written page and the storied landscape are warehouses of memory that are external to the individual body. [...] [T]he act of remembering involves a recognition of a relationship between the body/mind and the external world that is not only determined by internal forces. The experience of memory is thus always already social, technological, and physical in that the conditions of the relationship between brain and object cannot help but be located in a complex range of conditions that offer the subject to the experience, and experience to the subject. (Mortimer-Sandilands 2008: 274)

There is, in other words, a mutual porosity between individuals and their landscapes. This very porosity of matter and perception constitutes, as Abram suggests, the mind of place—something that is not simply an ensemble of cultural constructs or a repository of ideas *inside* a subject, but a "carnal" atmosphere, a permeable "awareness" transpiring back and forth from the earth to every single element and living being, including the human.[6] Lacking the recognition of the way the "relationship between the body/mind and the external world" could be articulated, Pompeii's bodies express the surprise in the place's mind—a mind whose memory, Sandilands maintains, is "always already social, technological, and physical" (Mortimer-Sandilands 2008: 274).

But the place's mind is, here, an oblivious mind. Ironically enough, already a couple of centuries after Pompeii had been buried by lava, there was almost no memory of its site anymore. The excavations and the emerging of these bodies from the hollows of space-time-matter represent therefore another epistemic rupture. This is a clear example of how material agency and discursive practices mingle in shaping the human and nonhuman world—bodies, landscape, and memory. The world is not simply "fabricated" by discourses and cultural memory. There is a strong, deep, and complex interrelation between the agency of natural forces and the agency of cultural practices. The landscape of discourses, words, and conceptual descriptors melts with the landscape of elements, of geology, of telluric and atmospheric agencies, of biotic and ecosystemic balances. The case of these bodies—and houses, and things, and forgotten places—emerging from the underground levels of a buried city is dialectically complementary to the surge of lava from the body of a mountain. Being rich with signs and meanings, and therefore with information, both these bodies and the lava create a material-semiotic

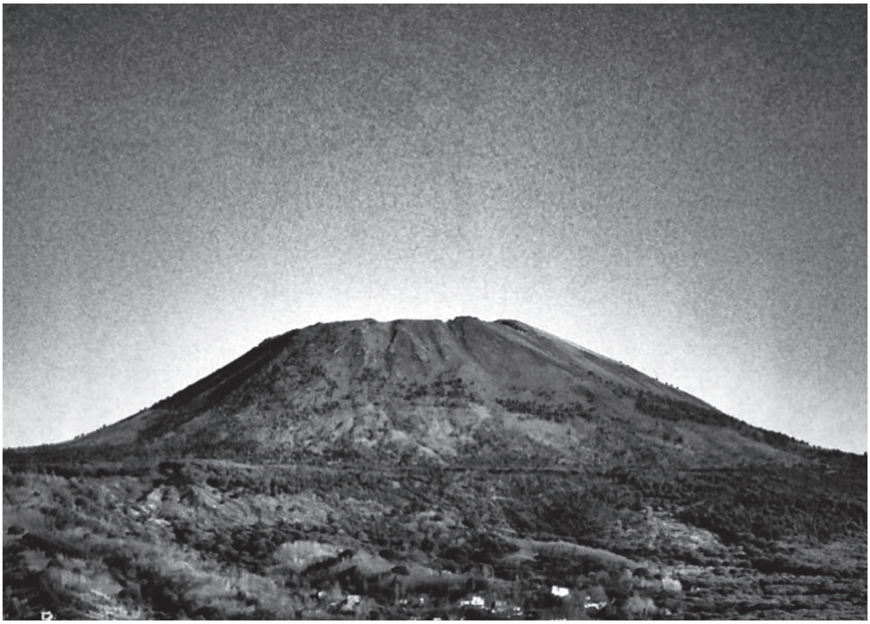
compound. In this compound, while the bodies inform (and narrate) about an almost forgotten complexity (the site of the ancient Pompeii), the lava informs (and narrates) about the forgotten orographic structure of this site, inhabited by volcanic and seismic agencies, even though it was believed to be "simply" a mountain.

The oblivion of the fact that every mountain has its own rhythms of motion, its telluric choreography, signals human amnesia regarding nature's force. The material correlation of memory and forgetting, however, is meaningful evidence about how society and nature cooperate in shaping "a world of complex phenomena in dynamic relationality" (Tuana 2001: 239). If these bodies left their imprints and transmitted their narratives over time, it is because of the interstice opened by a combination of biochemical elements, environmental conditions, geophysical energies, and cultural frames over time. This interstice is filled with apersonal agency and is pervaded by forces that, as Jeffrey Cohen says, are inhuman per definition:

> *Inhuman* means not human [...] and therefore includes a world of forces, objects, and nonhuman beings. But *in-human* also indicates the alien within (a human body is an ecosystem filled with strange organisms; a human collective is an ecosystem filled with strange objects), and requires as well a consideration of the violently *inhumane*. (Cohen 2013b: 271)

The "violently inhumane" can have many forms: a volcanic eruption, a virus, a falling asteroid, war, and even politics. Combined with human life, all these things shape "collectives" in which strange objects express their agency in pulsating porosity. What our reading suggests is that these collectives are dynamically contextual, their agency always porously "in the making" with an outside. Taken in their process of becoming with the world, bodies display "the importance of context to human cognition," also in relation to memory: "Just as disembodiment require[s] that context be erased, so remembering embodiment means that context be put back into the picture" (Hayles 1999: 203).

In this pervious dimension in which bodies are absorbed by the world, and the world—in the form of lava or discourses—is absorbed by bodies, landscape is the material and cognitive context of memory. And it is, therefore, a transformative site of cognitive categories. If remembrance is "a recognition of a relationship between the body/mind and the external world that is not only determined by internal forces" (Mortimer-Sandilands 2008:



The Sleep of Reason (2012). Courtesy of Christian Arpaia.

274), then landscape is the deciding site where the relation of inside and outside, body/mind and world, gets reinforced or progressively erased. In the shadow of Vesuvius, an intra-action of multifarious elements produced an ironic phenomenon: just as the "natural" body of a volcano was forgotten in the evolving human narratives, the "cultural" and more-than-human body of Pompeii was forgotten only a couple of centuries after it was buried by the eruption. The place's mind had returned to its Plutonic sleep.

In the hollows and plenums of space-time-matter, the erratic emergences of natureculture always surprise, and then confound.

Tableau II: Skinned bodies

In 1944, just after the arrival of the Allied Army, another eruption hit the Vesuvian area. Curzio Malaparte (1898–1957), a former Fascist journalist who subsequently became a philo-American writer, described the event in his novel *La pelle* (*The Skin*):

> The sky to the East was scarred by a huge, crimson gash, which tinged the sea blood-red […]. Shaken by subterranean convulsions, the earth trembled; the houses rocked at their foundations […]. Vesuvius was screaming in the night, spitting blood and fire. Never since the day that saw the final destruction of Herculaneum and Pompeii, buried alive in their tomb of ashes and lava, had so dreadful a voice been heard in the heavens. (Malaparte 1952: 280)

The violence of nature and the violence of the humans over Naples's bodies go hand in hand in this controversial book, written immediately after the end of the war and published in 1949. Fiercely attacked by many Italian intellectuals of the time and even censored for the crudeness of its descriptions of Naples's "moral plagues" (in the English translation, several scenes and an entire chapter on an ancient ritual of "queer maternity" are missing), *The Skin* is a story about the "liberation" of Naples, freed from the Nazis but then occupied by the Allied Army in 1943–5.[7] In a scenery dominated by ruin and pain, Naples appeared at that time as a completely annihilated city: severe bombing in the port area had left 200,000 people homeless, without water, and in desperate hygienic conditions. Soon, with the collusion of many levels of army command, the population fell at the mercy of criminal powers. As Paul Ginsborg reminds us, the city touched levels of "degradation and disease that it had not known since the great plagues of the seventeenth century. Most of the poorer women were forced into prostitution, and severe epidemics of typhus and venereal disease afflicted both the civilian and military population" (Ginsborg 2003: 37). All this was the concrete setting of Malaparte's stories.

More than a novel with a traditional plot, *The Skin* is a memoir-like succession of apparently autobiographic episodes taken from the author's experience as an officer of the Italian Army. Having the role of facilitating the "interchange" between the Americans and "liberated" Naples, Malaparte himself seems to act as a membrane, a filter between these two different worlds, something which is also evident from the recurring usage of English expressions emerging from the Italian text of the novel. With his dense and provocative prose, Malaparte—who had already represented the brutality of the Second World War in his previous novel *Kaputt* (1944)—scratches the surface of this world of liberators and victims, pointing out the penetration of the "violently inhumane" (volcanic eruptions, war, corruption) into the

city's flesh. *The Skin* is the narrative—strong, unpleasant, and powerful—of this penetration. Showing Naples's destroyed urban body and its innumerable wounded bodies (both human and nonhuman), Malaparte's novel represents how, coupled with the uncontrollable agency of nature, war and liberation create an unpredictable mixture of material and discursive elements that pierce the skin of people and the land, irremediably changing them, leaving them without protection, either from the outside or from the inside.

The quoted passage on the eruption of 1944 is exemplary in this respect. Here, as in several other similar episodes, the author's rhetorical artifice of depicting natural elements as sentient organisms is evident, even excessive: the sky is disfigured and bleeds into the sea; the earth trembles in convulsions, and houses rock; the volcano screams in the night, "spitting blood and fire"; its "dreadful voice" is "heard" in the heavens. This vision seems here to dynamically complement a description provided by Karl Löwith, who saw in the lava's "total inhumanness," an "irrevocable, naked, and speechless ruin, one that comes out the dark and black nothingness of an infernal crater" (Löwith 2000: 65). In spite of its apparent (at times naïve and grotesque) zoomorphism, however, the novel's passage conveys a complex vision of nature and history, themselves bordering the "black nothingness" of this crater.

In Malaparte's vision, the volcanic eruption and the scars on land act as a counterpoint to the discourse about the city being "liberated" by the Allied Army. Even if war—the "violently *inhumane*" per definition—is apparently over, there is no liberation from the "violently *inhuman*" force of the elements: a force so gruesome as to assault the body of the land itself and to make the elements "scream" in terror and convulsion. But one thing distinctly emerges in this place suffering the tremendous aftermaths of the conflict: in front of the violence of both war and nature, everything is a body, and everything is ripped and exposed. Like the bodies of people and animals, the land, the sea, the sky, and the volcano are also bodies. The eruption and the war affecting the land's body play a natural-cultural mirroring game—again, a *mise en abyme*—with the eruption and war affecting the bodies of Naples. Saturating this porous corporeal "collective," a dangerous—sometimes terrifying—interplay of agencies scratches every skin and enters every flesh.

In Malaparte's novel the skin is thus both a membrane and a metaphor; it is a medium for and a sign of the permeability of substances, a "dangerously

receptive place of contact and transmission, […] of consciousness and agency" (Sandilands 2004: 33). Once the skin has been damaged, these substances—and elements, discourses, practices, and worldviews—collide with each other, leaving bodies fully exposed to the "violently inhumane." As a result, all the oddities, the contradictions, and the "moral" ruins of this city are conjured up on the surface, materializing into Naples's bodies and their stories.

Among these bodies, the most vulnerable to the violence of "History" (the capitalized "History" that figures as the magmatic and obscurely agentic background in Elsa Morante's famous novel *La Storia*) are those of the "innocents": children, virgins sold to American soldiers, animals, and even rare fish taken from the Aquarium to be served as a meal in surreal banquets. All of these bodies, in Malaparte's book, are transformed into narrative agencies that testify to the entanglements of politics, violence, illness, moral discourses, and survival struggles in a city whose rich and glorious past seems to be turned into damnation.

Naples's damnation, Malaparte suggests, is its failed transformation of the body politic into a real, modern, citizenry.[8] In the imagination of the city, the body is therefore everything: it is language, it is money, it is food, it is a battlefield, an abyss, and a fate. It is even a convulsive proscenium for queer sexuality, as in the censored episode "Il figlio di Adamo," "Adam's child" (Malaparte 2010: 135–56). Invited by an American officer, Malaparte attends a secretly performed "Uranian ritual"[9] of queer maternity (here dubbed "La figliata," "The delivery").[10] In a villa at the foothills of Mount Vesuvius, a young man, disguised as a woman and surrounded by several other figures (Allied officers, male members of the local aristocracy, young peasants, and an old woman acting as a midwife), "gives birth" to a "little monster," a baby-like wooden puppet (Malaparte 2010: 150). After this dramatic scene, in a climax of grotesque excitement, an orgy takes place. Here the puppet, which displays a huge phallus, similar to the augural priapic statuettes found in Pompeii, is taken in triumph and then dismembered.

Interesting comments could be made here, for example, on the connection between queerness, pre-Christian rituals of generation, and Fascist ideology.[11] But what this episode openly reminds us is that the bodies of Naples are intrinsically hybrid and queer. In the novel and in the city's imagination, they are in fact male and female, human and nonhuman, sacred and impure. Seen in this

light, the *Corpo di Napoli* is also a queer statue—a male body apparently breast-feeding its children. Even Parthenope, the nymph or siren who, according to legends, founded the city, is a hybrid being, halfway between the human and the nonhuman. In Malaparte's novel, Naples itself emerges as city and noncity, a preurban dimension inhabited by a historically porous collective of human and nonhuman forces, in which the human part waits to "progress" toward citizenry and reason. Here victims and offenders, liberators and enemies are together, their roles often overlapping. In this world, whose history is always hybridized with mythos, and whose bodies are always interspersed with all sort of material-discursive agencies, the human "is determined in that no-one's land between myth and reason, in the ambiguous twilight where the living accepts to be confronted with the inanimate images delivered to it by historical memory, so that it can take them back to life," as Giorgio Agamben says (Agamben 2007: 34–5). In *The Skin*, this queer and posthuman dimension is the other side of the Arcadian Mediterranean dream of (philosophical and physical) light and (natural and moral) lushness. Sinister, violent, and queer, Malaparte's Naples is a dark Arcadia; it is the Mediterranean's Underworld.

An uncanny continuity unifies the bodies that populate this porous Underworld. This is the continuity of blurred ontological boundaries: here all bodies, human and nonhuman, are metamorphoses of each other, blends of material elements in their formative and performative histories. But this porous interchange of substances is even more visible in the inescapably metabolic and quasi-cannibalistic dimension of life. As Malaparte insists, commensality and mutual ingestion are basic relations among Naples's bodies. An interesting episode in this respect is that of "General Cork's Banquet." In a starving Naples, fishing in the bay has been prohibited due to the pollution caused by bombing (an element through which the trans-corporeal dimension of the environments of war is interestingly depicted). As a result, the Americans start eating fish from the Aquarium, and, in a gala dinner at the headquarters, a "siren" is served over a bed of lettuce and corals. In an expressionist crescendo of bodily details, this rare fish—here claimed to belong to the family of Sirenoidei—is described as having the look of a boiled little girl:

> In the middle of the tray was a little girl, or something that resembled a little girl. She lay face upwards on a bed of green lettuce-leaves, encircled by a large wreath of pink coral stems. [. . .] She was naked; but her dark, shining skin [. . .]

> was exactly like a well-fitting dress in the way in which it outlined her still callow yet already well-proportioned form, the gentle curve of her hips, her slightly protruding belly, her little virginal breasts, and her broad, plum shoulders. She might have been not more than eight or ten years old […]. Here and there […] the skin had been torn out or pulpified by the process of cooking, and through the cracks and fissures a glimpse was afforded of the tender flesh, which in some places was silvery, in others golden […]. She had short, fin-like arms, pointed at the ends and similar in shape to hands with no fingers. […] Her flanks were long and slender, and terminated, exactly as Ovid says, *in piscem*—in a fish's tail. […] It was the first time that I had even seen a little girl who had been cooked […] and I was silent. […] All the diners were pale with horror.
>
> General Cork raised his eyes and looked at his guests. "But it isn't a fish ... It's a little girl!" he exclaimed in a trembling voice.
>
> "No," I said, "it's a fish […]. It's the famous Siren from the Aquarium." (Malaparte 1952: 235–6)

Besides the trustworthiness of the episode, which is closer to surrealism than to scientific ichthyology and certainly a literary invention of the author's, in this context the idea of eating rare fish from an aquarium has a very powerful symbolic significance. It represents a whole library of evolution being served by war on plates of the finest porcelain. And this evolution is not simply a natural evolution, but also a symbolic-cultural one. The siren is part of the imagination of a city stemming from a "virginal" mermaid (the mythical Parthenope), and where even the virginity of the children's bodies is disrupted by the violence of war.

Eating the siren is a "naked lunch" disclosing a material-symbolic abyss: it means eating the substance and body of the city and ritually consuming its identity through a marine, evolutionary, and *gendered* Eucharist. The body of the fish, which seems to be already metamorphosing into a mammal, is in fact that of a female creature: we see "the gentle curve of *her* hips, her slightly protruding *belly*, her little virginal *breasts*" (emphases added). In this precultural cannibalistic dimension, this fish-mammal-female body is enmeshed with that of a human being. The outcome of this mesh is an intermediate and hybrid deity, which is here much more concrete, physically determined, and ontologically eloquent than the disembodied Spirit of transcendental theology. In a paradoxical ritual, metaphysics converts into metabolism. *Parousía*—the advent and presence of god—morphs into porosity.

The fact that the diners (among whom are military officers, a lady, and a Catholic priest) refuse to eat this meal, and the fact that, nevertheless, this womanlike fish is killed and cooked, recalls the dialectic antithesis between conscious and unconscious, totem and taboo.[12] It is a cultural self-censorship that clashes with war as a total openness and wildness, both corporeal and moral. And indeed, the territory, along with its bodies, is now wildly open. War opens the corporeal breach, which is the breach wide open in the body of land, society, and the city. Finally, there is no frontier in the attack to the bodies of Naples, even more if these bodies are sacred. Once sirens have been slaughtered, everything that happens afterward is simple corollary.

Tableau III: Resisting bodies

We started this journey with another siren, which proved in turn to be a river—the Nile—and finally a body: the legendary body of Naples in the shape of the ancient, enigmatic statue nestled in a "small piazza that in contradiction to its size is known as the Largo Corpo di Napoli" (Verdicchio 2007: 61).

As a philosophy student, in the early 1990s, I used to cross these narrow and gray streets almost every day. Amid the crowd of perpetually rushing people and eternally returning things, other bodies were visible there, at that time: human-sized figures in sepia or black and white, mysteriously disseminated between old electoral posters and publicities. Creatively quoted from Caravaggio and other mannerist painters, they penetrated inside the massive trachyte walls of the medieval and Renaissance buildings overlooking the *decumani*. A small epiphany limited in time, these figures were trompe-l'oeil serigraphs titled *Naples: La peau des murs—Naples: The Skin of Walls*—affixed to palaces and street corners by the French artist Ernest Pignon-Ernest.[13] I often saw children playing ball near these scraping and ephemeral artworks that have now completely dissolved, maybe merging into the city's larger body and pervious volcanic membranes.

This was many years ago. But now, filtering through Naples's multilayered porosity, a question comes to mind, and this question is obviously about bodies: what happens to Naples's body, today? And what are, now, the stories

of its innumerable, peaceless, and persistently struggling bodies? The previous two tableaux have been chosen to partly answer this very issue. The stories they tell, in fact, are still carved on Naples's land and corporeal matter.

These are stories of forgetfulness, an amnesia that, despite the plethora of popular songs and rhetorical statements, is visible in the fissure between the Vesuvian people and their volcanic territory. This fissure is perceptible, and even measurable, in a visual art project titled *Napoli Explosion*, a suite of StopEmotion© pictures annually taken by photographer Mario Amura on New Year's Eve while standing on the other side of the Bay, on top of Mount Faito, by Castellammare di Stabia.[14] The lights, which almost reach the edge of the crater, are fireworks. But let us not be deceived by the apparent *joie de vivre* of these glows and colors: the volcano's image is, in fact, a funereal one. Not only does it speak of the people who, as a consequence of these "cheerful" explosives, are maimed or even die every year in those precise moments and places as if in a theater of war, of all the animals—domestic and feral—terrified and killed by these fireworks, and of the ramified networks of illegality, exploitation, violence, and chemical pollution ensuing their production and usage.[15] This picture is also saying how high real estate speculation has climbed on Vesuvius's slopes: as it distinctly appears from Amura's



Napoli Explosion (2015). Courtesy of Mario Amura.

images, houses completely surround the crater. This means that, regardless of physical evidence, embodied cognitions, and any precautionary principle, in the local imagination Mount Vesuvius has returned to being "simply" a mountain, and it is covered with a crust of (mainly unlawful) constructions. Its nature, along with its threatened living surroundings, has been, once again, disremembered.[16]

But the stories that filter through Naples's porosity are also stories of violence, a violence pervading the flesh and skin of this land's corporeal matter in many forms. The literary tableau on Malaparte's novel illustrates the ripping of Naples's skin, surprised and assaulted in all its vulnerable parts by the ferocity of elements and History. Today, however, the stories of violence and war inflicted on Naples's bodies are also other ones. These bodies are often toxic, absorbing in their perviousness the millions of tons of pollutants illegally dumped in this region by the so-called ecomafia and its vast network of political complicities.[17] Far from the city center, in the outsized and hideous non-place called "metropolitan city" or in the formerly verdant countryside, these embodied stories become "subterranean and subcutaneous," violently disturbing and densely invisible, "easy (and convenient) to forget, or to disbelieve" (Past 2013: 607). Contamination, in certain areas, is so high that epidemiological studies report an alarming increase of toxic-related diseases due to an intermingling of substances such as arsenic in water supplies, lead, cadmium, and mercury in the ground, and dioxin in the residents' blood (De Felip and Di Domenico 2010). And so, once the echo of the gorgeous architectures and picturesque Mediterranean chaos have dissolved, the bodies you encounter in the outskirts tell bio-narratives of pollution and marginality, of missed protection, of people and places chronically peripheral.[18] If, as Véronique Bragard has noted, "material waste constitutes an archeological strata of information about a revolved past" (Bragard 2013: 481), this "revolved past" is here present in stories of crime and abandon, stories of violence and, sometimes, resistance. To these embodied narratives every one of us, near and far from this place, whether consciously or not, participates. Because violence, in the environment, "might be slow, but it is not still" (Cohen and Duckert 2015: 1).

The case of Naples is representative of a blend of historical factors that include decades of misrule, missed social integration, wrong development

policies, industrial toxicity, poor enforcement of environmental regulation, a prolonged need for jobs, and insufficient waste facilities for a growing population. Over the years this dangerous mix has led to a "waste crisis" culminating in 2008 with 400,000 tons of uncollected rubbish piled in the streets. To make this picture darker is the emergence of the ecomafia. Coined in 1994 by Legambiente, the major Italian environmental NGO, the term "ecomafia" describes a whole series of socio-ecologically lethal criminal activities, organized in networks that extend far beyond Italian borders. Among these crimes, the unlawful disposing of waste stands out as the most harmful but also as the most profitable, even more than the drug business. For ecomafia clans "trash is gold," as Elena Past incisively titles her essay, quoting the confession of a camorra affiliate (Past 2013: 598). Even though a precise figure of this trafficking is clearly impossible due to the "subterranean" nature of criminal activities, it has been calculated that, in the decade 2002–12, 10 million tons of waste have been illegally dumped in the Campania region (Pergolizzi 2012: 94). Narrating ecomafia's traffic in his novel *Gomorrah*, Neapolitan writer Roberto Saviano has visualized this pile of rubbish as "the tallest mountain on earth" (Saviano 2007: 283), bigger than Mont Blanc and Everest put together, rising 14,600 meters (47,900 ft) from a base of three hectares.

What this orographic picture of an excalating toxicity recounts is also that the fault lines of pollution replicate the fault lines of Italy's national identity. As Marco Armiero reminds us, "[i]n the dualistic structure of the Italian society, the South found its position within the capitalistic trade-mill of production, becoming the cheap trash can of the factories from the North" (Armiero 2014a: 171). Indeed, revealing the thick web of connivance between corrupt politicians and ecomafia clans, criminal investigations have strikingly delineated the north-south trajectory taken by toxic waste. For decades, healthy and fertile agricultural areas in the southern regions, and Campania in particular, have secretly absorbed all sorts of hazardous waste coming from the industrial poles of our more "developed" North, including for example Porto Marghera's Petrolchimico or the notorious Cengio's ACNA factory (see Chapters 2 and 4). It is "due to those criminal activities that Campania today has the largest contaminated areas in the entire nation, consisting in all of about 2,500 highly polluted sites" (Armiero 2014a: 172).

Targeted in detectable, but more often in undetectable ways, citizens can hardly avoid the risks of contamination, and their bodies, which here more than elsewhere in Italy develop all forms of cancerous tumors and endocrinal disorders (Bidoli et al. 2011), are the eloquent storytellers of this spiral of eco-social aggression and environmental crime for which Campania holds the national record (Legambiente, 2014). This is "slow violence" in Naples: an invisible, socially intersectional, and massive "slow motion slaughter" (Nixon 2011: 213), which takes place in the opaque necro-ecologies of power, illegality, and political slackness. Because Naples's rubbish is of course an eminently political issue. What these bodily narratives expose is that there is a form of pollution just as infiltrating and dangerous as the material one. This is the pollution hiding in behaviors and words, in the hazy territory where political discourses and social life intermingle with environmentally lethal activities, some of which are illegal, some others perfectly within the bounds of the law and regulation.

In Naples's case, one of these legal measures was the decreeing of an "emergency regime," a typically authoritarian system generally based on the suspension of democratic rules. An ad hoc Committee for this "waste emergency" was also created, which, predictably, became a barrier against any improvement in waste disposal policies: "Instead of making it an instrument to solve the emergency, its extra-ordinary powers made it an instrument to avoid a dialogue with citizens and local administrations" (Iacuelli 2008: 222). Its members were in some cases subsequently indicted. And so, apart from failing to resolve the situation, this waste emergency regime—strongly supported by the former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and his government—contributed to exacerbate Naples's problems, revealing the much more profound crisis of citizenship and democracy lying beneath the ecological one.[19]

As this strange complicity of waste, ecology, and politics suggests, to read pollution as a merely material or physical phenomenon is to miss the big part of the picture. "Pollution and poisoning are mental as well as physical phenomena, subjective as well as objective phenomena," Herbert Marcuse said (Marcuse 2005: 175). Confirming this view, Naples's tangible narrative proves how the eco-social ruin of its land and bodies results from an intra-action of toxic material substances and toxic discourses and practices, whereby inadequate environmental policies, corruption, and criminal complicities

have cooperated with uncontrolled industrial activities and forms of maldevelopment in ripping the social fabric, creating unequal protection, thwarting citizenship, and damaging human and nonhuman life. All these elements merge into the flesh of the body politic, evincing how the health of biological systems is strictly connected to political, social, and ethical issues. But, as we see and understand our bodies as immersed "in the radically local and mobile environments that are always with us but never entirely under our conscious control" (Sullivan 2012: 528), the living narratives encumbered in Naples's bodies suggest that contamination has also another important power: the power to concretely reveal abuses and inequalities. Reacting with the bodies of organisms and land as in a litmus test, it signals the stories of political failures, socio-ecological decline, and the discriminatory practices that infiltrate societies. The ethical message conveyed by this "'language beneath the language' […] written in the fortunes of bodies" (Wheeler 2006: 111) is the truth of biology.[20]

All of these stories, signs, and messages are inscribed on the living bodies of Naples. They are bodies in which, as in Pompeii's plasters, an absence is often encapsulated: it is the absence of citizenship and of collective protection, the absence of a political ecology both of things and humans. Here the stories of matter veer into stories of justice. Here, as Marco Armiero and Giacomo D'Alisa write about Naples's waste crisis, "the very frontier between surrounding and surrounded is blurred up […] placing human body at the crossroad of this meeting" (Armiero and D'Alisa 2012: 56). In our perspective, it is not only the frontier between surrounding and surrounded to be blurred, but also the frontier of the text. The body is a semiotic agent in its very materiality. It is *in* the body that the formative agencies at work in a place's life materialize and express themselves. Naples's bodies are texts, the city itself is a text, and its texture is its own narrative. It is a narrative populated by substances, choices, voices, human presences, illness, scars, memory, forgetfulness, natural catastrophes, war, contamination, fear, death, and life.

From a more-than-human and archeological past to our trans-corporeal and postindustrial present, the narrative agency of Naples's porous bodies conveys the matter and discourses of their formative histories. In so doing, this agency creates ties of awareness that, disclosing the processes at work in these bodies' becoming, restore their political imagination. The role of

storytelling is essential: when human creativity "plays" together with the narrative agency of matter, intra-acting with it, it can generate stories and discourses that "diffract" the complexity of our porous collective, producing emergences of meanings that amplify reality, also affecting our cognitive response to this reality. Being a powerful antidote, in both ethical and political terms, against any authoritarian "narrative monopoly" (Nixon 2011: 170), this collective storytelling capacity is crucial for a practice of liberation.[21]

Naples's waste emergency has been the subject of a number of documentaries, novels, films, dramas, and reportages.[22] But there are also other stories coming from people—activists, grassroots committees, simple citizens—that have created coalitions aimed at making Naples's bodily plots visible and audible, eventually defying the "normalizing" bio-political narrative imposed by the authorities. Taking their own bodies and their own land as the starting texts for their mutual pathway of knowledge, citizens have initiated social dynamics in which cognitive empowerment goes hand in hand with the battle for ecological health and participatory democracy. They have, in other words, created the conditions for cognitive justice, which is crucial to overcome the "abyssal" divide imposed by the hierarchical distribution of knowledges and powers (de Sousa Santos 2007). And so, after years of abuses, in Naples the eloquence of bodies has taken the face of activists and intellectuals struggling side by side for a radical decontamination of body politic and political discourse. For example, the project, led by the environmental historian Marco Armiero, to collect the voices of Naples's activist women fighting against the mutation of their land and cells into the nation's waste dump is one of the most meaningful forms of "guerrilla narrative" experimented in western countries' actions for environmental justice.[23] Although operations like this one might not be sufficient to decontaminate territories and bodies, they are surely indispensable to decontaminate discourses.

(Extra-)frame

Mapping reality is a tricky operation; in this map, not only do the surface lines count, but also—and most of all—the pervious overlappings, the meshings of substances and places. A map of reality, in this sense, is always already

trans-local and trans-corporeal, and it is also trans-temporal: it is not said, in fact, that what starts *here* will finish *now*. Mapping reality is mapping the *longue durée* of combined forces and discourses, the subterranean rivers of cognitive processes, the lasting effects of violence, whether elemental or social. Mapping reality is always already a multidimensional journey in the landscapes of porosity.

I wrote this chapter because I grew up in a segment of these landscapes closer to the stories narrated in these pages. My birthplace, Torre Annunziata, anciently called Oplontis, was buried by the eruption of AD 79 along with Pompeii and Herculaneum. The watershed where I used to bathe as a child is the same one where Pliny the Elder observed and described Vesuvius's upsurge, giving his name to this type of pine tree-shaped eruptions, and thus transforming his own death into a geological classification. The shore where Goethe had a "lighthearted" company dinner, "with a delightful view of Castellammare and Sorrento" (Goethe 1970: 204) in March 1787 is practically, depending on the tides and on the periodically changing profile of the coast, my shore.[24] Ever since I was a child, I have been heeding these landscapes; ever since their individual uniqueness has morphed into concepts, the stories they tell have become visible to my eyes as models apt to interpret other stories, other dynamics, other places.

Torre Annunziata is part of the landscape of porosity for many reasons. It is so because it is bodily permeable and physically vulnerable, because it is one of those places where contamination is available in many—more or less detectable—forms, both social and environmental, and finally, because it is constantly exposed to the fluctuations of memory and forgetting, cognitive and material processes of unearthing and burying, which we have encountered in Pompeii's story. All these dynamics are visible in the landscape and expressed by the bodies living on this land. And these are the dynamics which involve, collectively, all the bodies of Naples.

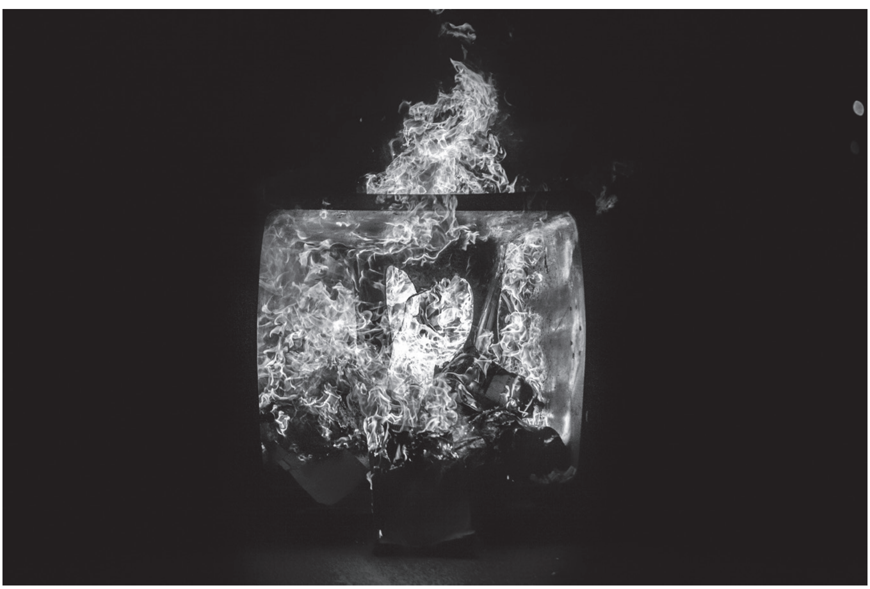
I do not intend to superimpose my voice on the voice of the things, places, or authors collected and analyzed in these pages. Quite the contrary, I wish to show how scarcely unique and circumscribed is our own experience, in the world's landscapes of porosity. Individuals, in these landscapes at large, do not really exist as such. Their being is not encapsulated in itself, but it expands always already outside itself. If individuals exist, they are always

trans-posed, trans-acted, trans-sected, and trans-fused in collective and fluid dynamics, as Stacy Alaimo and Nancy Tuana among others have perfectly seen. Set in this landscape, the individuals' borders are receptive, their texture is viscous. Their "I" is always in a process of negotiation with a "non-I." In times of eco-ontological "hyperobjects" such as biospheric pollution or global warming, Timothy Morton writes,

> No longer are my intimate impressions "personal" in the sense that they are "merely mine" or "subjective only" […]. I become (and so do you) a litmus test […]. I am scooped out from the inside. My situatedness and the rhetoric of situatedness in this case is not a place of defensive self-certainty but precisely its opposite. (Morton 2013: 5)

For this reason, the stories of these landscapes, which include myself as a narrating voice, do not belong strictly to me, but largely to everybody.

In these landscapes, I have seen the waste coming from peripheral industrial districts pouring millions of tons of pollutants in the watershed where Goethe had his agreeable dinner, that March afternoon of 1787. I have seen Vesuvius's orchards getting covered with rubbish, disposed building rubble, and mysterious substances, from which it was safer to stay distant. I have



E' il tuo cuore che sta bruciando (2009). Courtesy of Mario Amura.

seen friends, relatives, pets, developing cancer. I have seen, for years, the trash containers under my house burn, as if it was a gleeful midsummer bonfire, a collective liberating ceremony. What was burning, though, was the heart of this place.

But I have also seen people reacting to all this, and asking more from their public institutions. Their stories, bodily and discursively, are stories of resistance. And these stories are, bodily and discursively, our stories, whether or not we are waste activists; whether or not we have occupied dumping sites challenging Berlusconi's police. Unconditionally, these stories invest and concern us. They concern and invest us because there is no safe distance from the trajectory of contamination, and above all because they interweave a cognitive, ethical, and substantial bond with you, who are now reading this page, and with me, talking to you.

The novelist Roberto Saviano, who since 2006 has been under a government protection plan because of the threats he received from the criminal clans he described in *Gomorrah*, has written:

> Someone said that, after Primo Levi, and after his novel *If This is a Man*, nobody will be able any more to say that they haven't been in Auschwitz. Not that they weren't aware of it, but that they hadn't been there. Here is what the powers—the criminal one, and all the other—fear in literature. They fear the fact that readers perceive that issue as their issue, those dynamics as their dynamics. (Saviano 2008: n. p.)

I believe that Naples's embodied stories enter our memory, our visions, our discourses, exactly as the substances and elements they talk about enter the bodies of those who are *radically situated* in those places. If "the power" fears all this, it is because this identification process creates new roots, new ties. It creates alliances of bodies and stories.

Almost a hundred years have passed since Benjamin and Lacis defined Naples as "the porous city." Today more than ever, this porosity is open before our eyes. It is a porosity of matters, of practices, and of memories. In this porosity full of stories, there is us, too. Including you, Reader. You, who might have never been in these places, who might well have never crossed these streets, grounds, and outskirts, and never felt the toxic miasmas coming up from the ground on a rainy day, or the smell of the Vesuvian apricots in June. But, despite all this, you are part of this reality, because it is this reality to be

part of you. You, too, are permeable to its elements, chemicals, and narratives. Because there is no "outside" the landscape of porosity, in the map of reality. Because we—all—are part of the story.

Notes

1 See the website of the City of Naples, http://www.comune.napoli.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/7 (accessed November 28, 2014).

2 See Benjamin and Lacis 2000: 33–9. See also Velardi 1992.

3 The term "ignimbrite" was coined by New Zealand geologist Patrick Marshall (1869–1950). See Marshall 1935: 1.

4 For the notion of "trans-corporeality" see Alaimo 2008 and 2010. For a discussion, Iovino 2012c.

5 A key tenet of Karen Barad's theory of agential realism is that phenomena result from the intra-actions of material and discursive practices and agencies, which co-emerge at once and via each other (hence *intra* and not *interaction*), thus constituting the world "in its ongoing becoming." Matter and meaning, Barad states, are "inextricably fused together, and no event, no matter how energetic, can tear them asunder […]. Mattering is simultaneously a matter of substance and significance" (Barad 2007: 3). A theoretical physicist and feminist philosopher, Barad draws this notion from quantum physics and from the experimental practice of mutual determination between observer and observed. For an application of this notion to ecocriticism, see Iovino and Oppermann 2014, in particular 1–17.

6 As Abram poetically put it: "Is consciousness really the special possession of our species? Or is it, rather, a property of the breathing biosphere—a quality in which we, along with the woodpeckers and the spreading weeds, all participate? Perhaps the apparent 'interiority' we ascribe to the mind has less to do with a separate consciousness located somewhere *inside me* and another entirely separate and distinct consciousness that sits *inside you*, and more to do with the intuition that we are both situated *within it*—a recognition that we are carnally immersed in an awareness that is not, properly speaking, ours, but is rather the earth's" (Abram 2014: 303). See also Abram 2010. For a bioregionalist application of this idea to the crisis of the Italian landscape, and of the Po Valley in particular, see Iovino 2012b.

7 As the English historian Paul Ginsborg notes, "In the South the British and Americans were greeted as liberators (as indeed they were), but all the

ambiguities of this liberation were soon revealed, and not only to the Italians. Harold Macmillan […] Allied High Commissioner in southern Italy in 1944, wrote later that the Italians had had 'the dual experience of being occupied by the Germans and liberated by the Allies … It was difficult to say which of the two processes was more painful or upsetting'" (Ginsborg 2003: 38). See also Norman Lewis's memoir *Naples '44*.

8 On this point, see also Iovino 2009, in particular the discourse of "thwarted citizenship."

9 In Italian "*Rito uraniano*." The author is here referring to the Platonic myth of the Aphrodite Urania, or Heavenly Aphrodite, who presided over "celestial" love (*Symposium* 187 d–e), and therefore over homosexual love, considered purer because not aimed at reproduction. As we will see, this last reference in *The Skin* is intended to be ironic, having this ritual a clearly performed "reproductive" aspect. For the definition of gay people as "Uranists" under the Fascist regime, see Benadusi 2005: 7–8.

10 In the Neapolitan language the word "*figliata*" refers primarily to nonhuman animals, notably mammals that reproduce in large numbers. It can be also taken to indicate a large human family, or the act of delivering a child. In this latter sense, however, it may have a class connotation, in that it is mostly used for the poorer strata of the population.

11 For a reading of this scene in relation to the ancient gnostic cults once widespread in the region (Mithra, Zoroaster), see Albrile 2010: 17–18. Benadusi notes that these "Uranian rituals" (also performed as "queer weddings") were widespread throughout Italy. However, while they were severely condemned in the northern areas of Italy, they were informally tolerated in the South. This difference of treatment signaled the bond, reinforced under the Fascism, of queerness and "race." Southern Italians were in fact considered as "anthropologically" different from and "racially" inferior to northerners, and therefore more "corrupted" and prone to act "against nature" (see Benadusi 2005: 100).

12 Malaparte's comment about his having seen a "cooked girl" for "the first time" is also noteworthy, implying that the serving up of the bodies of Naples will be repeated in future banquets. I thank Elena Past for drawing my attention to this element.

13 Pictures of these artworks are available online on Pignon-Ernest's website: http://pignon-ernest.com/ (accessed March 17, 2015). See also Pignon-Ernest 2010; Velter 2014.

14 See Amura's website: http://mario-amura.com/?page_id=117 (accessed February 19, 2015). StopEmotion© is a project of live-set performance in which music

and hundreds of pictures are "played together," generating each time a unique rhythm of motion.

15 A really illuminating account about fireworks from the point of view of ecocriticism and feminist environmental ethics has been given by Greta Gaard, who writes: "A feminist ecocritical perspective traces the branches of firearms and fireworks down to their shared root: down to the environmental injustices of the death-dealing slow violence inherent in child slavery, workplace injuries, and economic injustice; down through the material facts of environmental toxins, through the human-animal studies' recognition of multiple species' injuries and deaths, down to the root of multiple and linked toxic narratives celebrating hyperseparation and dominance" (Gaard 2013: 272–3). Even though her essay is specifically focused on the U.S. "fireworks culture," Gaard adopts a larger socio-historical perspective, also taking into consideration Naples (272) and Vesuvius (260).

16 On Vesuvius as "Europe's ticking time bomb," see Katherine Barnes's article on *Nature*, which is preceded by the following editorial caption: 'Vesuvius is one of the most dangerous volcanoes in the world—but scientists and the civil authorities can't agree on how to prepare for a future eruption' (Barnes 2011: 140).

17 According to Legambiente, in 2013 the illegal activities related to waste business in Naples's region can be quantified in 4,703 verified violations (over 16 per cent of all environmental crimes in Italy), fifty-one arrested persons, 4,072 legally suited person, 1,339 sequestrated properties (Legambiente 2014: 19). Of course, these data refer to the cases effectively discovered by police forces. See Armiero 2008; Past 2013.

18 In her article "Trash is Gold" (2013), Elena Past effectively analyzes the tropes of periphery and invisibility both in the material reality of Campania's waste crisis and in the filmic representations of this reality.

19 "As a matter of fact, the government granted special powers to the CWE which, in the name of the emergency, could violate European, national and regional rules and procedures, including environmental impact assessment. Due to the combination of extraordinary power and an almost unlimited availability of funds, the CWE affected not only the management of waste but also the politics and economies of the entire region for about twenty years" (Armiero 2014a: 170). On Naples's waste crisis as an eco-social crisis of citizenship, see Iovino 2009.

20 As elsewhere in this book (see Chapter 2), I have in mind Wendy Wheeler's groundbreaking account of biosemiotics. Here I refer in particular to her

analysis of epidemiology as a field of evidence "of the ways in which both cultural […] and natural signs […] can be written on bodies in the form of natural signs (disease in this case)" (Wheeler 2006: 111). In explaining how eco-social balances are "written in our bodies in terms of flourishing or […] illness" (Wheeler 2006: 12), she also points out: "liberal ideology […] has had the effect of placing responsibility for human flourishing […] upon individuals, when, in fact, it is quite clear that flourishing (and its absence) is, at base, systemic, not individual. […] [E]pidemiology has some very interesting things to teach us, not only about the importance of natural and social environments, and of our fundamentally social and collective nature, but also about the power, health, and life and death expectations which attach to social hubs" (Wheeler 2006: 30–1).

21 The political importance of an "ethics of narration" in the context of Naples's waste crisis, seen as a crisis of environmental justice, is the thesis of my essay "Naples 2008, or, the Waste Land" (Iovino 2009). On this point, see also Armiero 2014a.

22 Let me just mention here Esmeralda Calabria's *Biutiful Cauntri* (2007), Ivana Corsale's *Campania Infelix/Unhappy Country* (2011), and Alessandro Casola's prophetic comedy *'A munnezza* (2002). For a recognition and discussion of the filmic production about Naples's waste, see at least Angelone 2011; Johnson 2008; Past 2013. I have cursorily analyzed some of these literary and filmic works in Iovino 2012d: 458–9.

23 In 2014 this project became a book, entitled *Teresa e le altre* (*Teresa and the Others*). As Armiero writes in the introduction: "Narrating means [here] counter-narrating, because environmental injustice is not only imposed by way of armored vehicles and truncheons, but also through a narrative which uproots any possible alternative, one which imposes an official truth and criminalizes whoever is against" (Armiero 2014b: 16). To this project I have also contributed a closing chapter (Iovino 2014). I am grateful to Marco and the other authors for this shared experience.

24 So Goethe wrote on March 13, 1787: "We met a company of lively Neapolitans, who were as natural and lighthearted as could be, and we all ate at the Torre dell'Annunziata. Our table was set close to the shore, with a delightful view of Castellammare and Sorrento, which seemed very near. One of the Neapolitans declared that, without a view of the sea, life would not be worth living" (Goethe 1970: 204). Scripted on a marble plaque, one can read this quote on a big trachyte wall facing the entrance of the ruins of the ancient Oplontis.

2

Cognitive Justice and the Truth of Biology

Death (and Life) in Venice

"There is still one of which you never speak."
Marco Polo bowed his head.
"Venice," the Kahn said.
Marco smiled. "What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?"
(Calvino 1997: 78)

The first time I visited Venice it was one mid-December. It was lightly rainy, not particularly cold. The high tide all over the *calli* and *campi* had transmuted the city into an evanescent mirror of itself—a doubled reality, fading away when you touch it, or step upon it. After a while, however, all this was gone by itself: ever since it is there, in that liminal swirl of northeast Italy, the lagoon breathes. And it breathes tides.

It was very valuable, in those few days, to experience how demanding it is to cohabit with elements that, in spite of all the delusions of modernity, you cannot control. Plunged into brackish waters, the city revealed the very volatility of this elemental cohabitation—a state of temporary (and perhaps occasional) balance, similar to the one that makes life—all life—"a vortex of shared precariousness and unchosen proximities," as Jeffrey Cohen says (Cohen 2015b: 107). To make the vortex of life even more precarious, even more shared in space and in time, many of these proximities are chosen: in Venice, for example, the odd intimacy with one of Europe's biggest petrochemical factories.

I remember entering Piazza San Marco from a side lane one night. The lights of the arcades were liquid; echoed in water, they were the square's

ground. Suspended on the strange sea-sky right over our feet, the delicacy of the basilica's decorations in floral Gothic style made the Piazza look like an old virgin, once so powerful and now needing to protect herself from the many threats of people, the world, and the changing times. With my PVC wellington boots and ridiculous cell phone, that night I sensed the wheeze of this venerable miss, slowly drowning in her own breath. On the other side of the lagoon, on terra firma, floral smokes were swirling up the cracking towers. And so I realized that, far from being just a picture in the museum of decadent imagery, death is in Venice.

Ecocriticism, diffractions, and Venice's texts

A recurrent trope among artists and writers long before Thomas Mann, death in Venice is much more than a fictional theme. It has indeed concrete faces, which come into sight with very recognizable features. These faces are the menacing waters and fluxes of energy generated by global warming; unsustainable tourism and gigantic cruise ships; the anti-ecological engineering systems carried out to control the increasing high tides; or common human activities, interfering day by day with the delicate ecosystem of the lagoon. Again, it has the face of dioxin and hepatic angiosarcoma, spread here for decades by the Montedison petrochemical factory of Porto Marghera, just a few miles from San Marco Square.

This chapter casts light on the embodiments of this death, on its materializations in the corporeality and in the many bodies of this city: its biome and ecosystem, its landscape, its human residents and workers. All these bodies tell stories: stories of elements and of natural dynamics, as well as stories of cultural practices, political visions, and industrial choices. They tell stories of life, but also stories of pollution, exploitation, and death. We will read all these bodies as texts, and we will read them in combination with literary works. My thesis is that "diffracting" these bodily and literary texts with each other—namely, reading them in mutual combination—is a way not only to unveil the hidden plots and meanings of a reality, but also to amplify the often unheard voices of this reality. Handled with this purpose in mind, ecocriticism becomes therefore a device to delve into the world's own

eloquence, and to elicit both the implicit message of those material texts and their generative connections with literary representations. When world and literature combine, as in the case of Venice, the whole expressiveness of reality is enhanced, and we are able to see more.[1]

What do we see in Venice, if we read it as a text? What is its "material narrative"? To say that Venice's body is a text to read is not simply a metaphor. Our global ecological crises confirm how deeply unstable and delicate is the equilibrium of natural-cultural substances and forces. As the perfect epitome of this fact, Venice represents the discordant harmony of elements upon which human civilization lies. Even more so, it challenges the very possibility of such a harmony. To create a city suspended on a lagoon, the Faustian dream of turning sea into solid ground, is an exercise in hybridity not only because it mixes water and land into a new elemental combination, but above all because it is an act of *hubris*, a violation of ontological pacts. Certainly, *hubris* may have a creative function, and Venice stays as the luminous splendor of this assumption. It is undeniable, however, that the instability of this "alluring yet threatening hybridity" (Sullivan 2014b: n.p.), produces here an incumbent state of danger. Not only is Venice exposed to its terraquaeous nature and to all the consequences of climate change; it is also exposed to decades of polluting practices, due to political and industrial choices, which proved to suppress and completely misread this complex reality. When political and industrial decisions such as the building of Porto Marghera's petrochemical factory were made, the *text* "Venice" was read in isolation from its broad *con-text*: in isolation from its ecosystem, its history, its elemental corporeality. The story of this misinterpretation is narrated by documents and bodies, it is written in cells and legal files, in industrial sludge and algae, in a landscape transformed into highways of pipes, in the air transformed into smoke.

In this chapter we will follow a series of stories—material stories and literary stories. After considering the narratives embedded in Venice's body, we will move to literature. In particular, we will take into account three authors: Thomas Mann, Andrea Zanzotto, and Marco Paolini, respectively a novelist, a poet, and an actor-playwright. Scrutinizing how literature interacts and interferes with this material textuality, we will see how such interferences add a further dimension to Venice's storied matter thus contributing

to accomplish ecocriticism's project of reading into—and thus restoring—the world's narrative layers.

This operation is not intended as a "local" journey. "Every time I describe a city, I am saying something about Venice," Marco Polo says in Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. Venice is "a first city that remains implicit" in all the others (Calvino 1997: 78). Our view is complementary to this one. Venice is our case in point, but implicit in our discourse are all the places where the balance between nature and non-nature is precarious, unstable, or challenging. In Venice's translucid text, we can catch a glimpse of many other places near and far, from Bhopal to New Orleans.

Text 1: Lagoon

To read the text of Venice one has to plunge deep. And so, as through an underground psychedelic trip, one reaches its "geological unconscious" (Zanzotto 2013a: 111), an extraordinarily dense subtext made of the co-emerging dynamics of waters, land, climate, ecology, and history. We find the hybrid natures of this place right here, preserved in a remote stratigraphy of memory and matter.

Elementally amphibious, Venice lies inside a lagoon, a mobile site where the blending of fluvial and saline waters determines unique evolutionary conditions for ecosystems. Extended over 340 square miles (550 km^2), the Venetian lagoon displays a rich and delicate web of biodiversity, also due to its distinctive microclimate: temperatures are here 2°C below the Mediterranean average. This creates a phenomenon called "Atlanticism," also characterized by the existence of a flora and fauna more similar to the Atlantic than to the rest of the Mediterranean. The lagoon has a special feature: it respires with the moon. Tides are the expression of this breath:

> It is easy to picture the steady coming-in and going-out of waters as a breath of the lagoon, which "inhales" high tide and "exhales" low tide. Like a lung expanding with the incoming air, the lagoon increases its surface with the incoming sea. (Fabbri 2003: 19)

The tide cycle lasts twelve hours; in the lagoon's fluctuating rhythm, time—the poet Andrea Zanzotto writes—"becomes visible [...] from hour to hour

in the mutual game of tides, the colors of sandbanks and marshes," and the emerging/submerged ground (Zanzotto 2013a: 112). It is this sequence of oscillations and stabilizations that marks the uniqueness of this place: "This is the lagoon, and this is not the lagoon, this is the lagoon's enigma, and this is the lagoon's overwhelming clarity. […] The lagoon is feverish and yet calm, at once reassuring and deceiving" (Zanzotto 2013a: 112–13).

But the Venetian landscape has not always been like this. Dating back to 2,500 years ago, the lagoon's current hydrogeological conformation is relatively recent. It was about the same period that, some 1,500 miles southeast, Egyptian slaves, under a pharaoh of the Fourth Dynasty, were erecting in Giza a pyramid that would become the first of the Seven Wonders. We thus need to dive further back in time to see the Venetian lagoon originating from the melting of a vast ice gulf, which used to connect the eastern border of the Alps with the center of the Adriatic Sea, on a territory extending approximately from Grado (near today's Slovenian border) to Ancona. Ten millennia ago, at the end of the last ice age, the glacier waters started flowing to the Adriatic Sea, shaping rivers that carried huge quantities of sediment. In the course of thousands of years, the heaviest sediment fell on the lagoon bed, hardening into very compact solidified clay, called "*caranto*" (from the late Latin *caris*, "rock"). The remaining sediment accumulated, contributing to the formation of a multitude of small islands. Here is Venice's core: a hundred sedimentary islands, covered with a unique vegetation of reeds and other plants, laying on a firm and thick Pleistocene paleo-ground.

Even though the terra firma was already populated in the Neolithic and the Bronze Ages, it was not until the fifth and sixth centuries AD that the first settlements over this land-sea started appearing. The settlers were mostly fishermen trying to escape the attacks of Visigoths, Huns, and Lombards, nomadic populations coming from the forests of northern Europe. Looking for shelter, these inland people began to make their abode on these tiny islands, connecting them with wooden bridges and creating canals. It is in these canals, Zanzotto writes, that Venice's "metaphysical blood" flows (Zanzotto 2013a: 112).

But these veins required a skeleton, too. And so, the fishermen started stacking tarred wooden piles into the muddy seabed, driving them until they reached the *caranto*. Underwater, surrounded by salty mud, in an oxygen-free

environment, these twenty-five meters-long oak trunks mineralized. They literally petrified, becoming as hard as concrete—as hard as the *caranto* itself—thus providing the perfect foundation for the development of the world above. It took an immense quantity of trees to make this "urban forest of buildings" (Zanzotto 2013b: 96), and to turn this place into a "beaver-republic," as Goethe viewed it in 1786 (Goethe 1970: 74). When the primitive palafittes became houses, palaces, streets, a generous part of the forests of northeast Italy, Istria, and Dalmatia had joined the *caranto* in this watery underworld to resurrect in the form of a city: Venice, *la Serenissima*, for centuries one of the most powerful city-states in Mediterranean Europe and in the world.[2]

This sumptuous composition was clearly the result of many concurrent forces, which, blending into a new hybrid reality, were forming hybrid, collective stories. Human and nonhuman "makers" contributed therefore to create Venice's concrete narrative. This is how Jorge Luis Borges portrays this compositional "making" in his *Atlas*:

> Rocks, the rivers whose cradle lies in the mountain peaks, those rivers' waters blending with the waters of the Adriatic sea, the cases and fates of history and geology, riptide, sand, the gradual formation of the islands, the proximity of Greece, fishes, migrating people, the Armorican and Baltic wars, the reed huts, the branches mixed with mud, the inextricable network of canals, primeval wolves, the incursions of Dalmatian pirates, the delicate cotto, terraces, marble, horses, Attila's spears, the fishermen protected by their own poverty, the Lombards, being a site where West and East meet, the days and nights of forgotten generations: these were the makers. (Borges 1985: 1332)

All these things and events, people, accidents, elements, inhuman forces were the authors of the *text* "Venice," a text that had been written and carefully interpreted by generations of citizens and governors.[3] Using the categories of their pre-ecological science, they knew that a lagoon is an amphibious biome whose unstable balance is due to the combined action of two contrasting forces: river waters and sea tides. River waters are responsible for carrying sediment to the sea. If this force prevails, the fate of lagoons is to become, in the long run, land. If tides prevail, lagoons become bays or gulfs. For over a millennium, the Venetian lagoon—whose main problem was not so much that of being submerged by water, but of being covered by

fluvial sediment—was able to keep its peculiar conditions stable thanks to the assiduous, unitary, and wise management carried out by the Republican government of the *Serenissima*.[4] This management, controlled by the seven Magistrates of the Waters, had nothing audacious in itself: it was only due, as Piero Bevilacqua notes, to a very pragmatic (and "non-religious") relationship to the past. Potential scenarios of risk could be anticipated from written testimonies and memories, as well as from the observation of ruins and monuments: "History was for Venetians a very concrete matter of forecast" (Bevilacqua 1998: 47). This implied an extremely realistic sense of human responsibility:

> To the eyes of countless generations of technicians and governors preoccupied about the fate of the lagoon, Venice's present and future appeared subordinated to the population's behavior, the magistrates' loyalty, the State's investments, much more than it was to fortune or nature's uncontrollable force. The past was not myth, but history. (Bevilacqua 1998: 49–50)

It was, in other words, absolutely clear to everybody that Venice's survival was "profoundly depending from human interests, actions, and material choices" (Bevilacqua 1998: 50). Be it ecological wisdom or empirical observation of past events, this form of management was a sensible interpretation of Venice's material text as a natural-cultural text: the public authorities and institutions *read* this place as a lagoon with a city in the middle, and acted accordingly, thus defending their "Faustian dream."

"Faustian dream" is meant here literally. In fact, it is likely that, without concretely experiencing Venice, Johann Wolfgang Goethe would have missed important elements for his last oeuvre. In his *Italian Journey*, in a note dated October 9, 1786, he provided a very accurate description of this distinctive natural-cultural formation, writing a page that is itself a masterpiece of *histoire naturelle*:

> The lagoons are a creation of nature. The interaction of tides and earth, followed by the gradual fall in level of the primeval ocean, formed an extensive tract of swampland at the extreme end of the Adriatic, which was covered at high tide but partly exposed at low. Human skill took over the highest portions of ground and thus Venice came into being as a cluster of hundreds of islands surrounded by hundreds of other islands. At great cost and with incredible energy, deep channels were dredged to enable warships to reach the vital points even at low

> tide. All that intelligence and hard work created in times past, intelligence and hard work have now to preserve. (Goethe 1970: 97)

Though not particularly sympathetic with the population of this "beaver-republic," Goethe praised the way Venetians controlled their environment, only recommending a few corrections in terms of urban hygiene. So he remarked:

> If only they would keep their city cleaner! It may be forbidden, under severe penalties, to empty garbage into the canals, but that does not prevent a sudden downpour from sweeping into them all the rubbish that has accumulated at the street corners, or, what is worse, from washing it into the drains, which are only meant to carry off waters, and choking them, so that the main squares are in constant danger of being flooded. (Goethe 1970: 98)[5]

In spite of Goethe's advices and of the *Serenissima*'s long tradition of water management, the "sensitive interpretation" of the lagoon's text eventually came to an end. On May 15, 1797, the French Army conquered the Republic. The very next day a Municipality was established "that would destroy the nation's moral and political unity, shattering along with it the State's prestige and authority" (Cessi 1981: 763). A few months later, on October 17, Napoleon signed the Treaty of Campoformio, agreeing to give Venice and the greatest part of its territory to the Emperor of Austria in compensation for the Netherlands, united to France.

Under the Habsburg domination, many portions of the lagoon were privatized; they were either reclaimed, and thus transformed into agricultural land, or enclosed and turned into fish farms. Almost one third of the lagoon was hence subtracted from the free expansion of tides and fluvial waters. Even more damage was inflicted by lowering the level of the canals connecting the city with the lagoon, and by enlarging the harbor mouths. Finally, the creation of groundwater wells for industrial use caused the ground level to sink even deeper: the "economy of land" was eventually devouring the space of waters.[6]

At the end of the nineteenth century, besides the digging of even deeper canals, bridges and railways were also built. In 1917 the decision was made to install a huge industrial plant in Marghera, on the lagoon's coastal area right in front of Venice, here, too, with significantly deeper waterways to allow big cargo ships. This, as it is easily imaginable, contributed to expose Venice

to the force of tides. Constrained by land, concrete, and all sorts of unnecessary enclosures, the lagoon's breath was becoming more and more arduous, gradually turning into a paradoxical threat for the city. Paradoxical, I insist, because the very ceasing of this breath would in the long run determine the end of the lagoon and, most likely, of Venice.

It has been through all these "anti-historical" (in Bevilacqua's sense) interventions that many people, including governors, have ceased to correctly "read" the Venice and the lagoon. In their eyes, from a dynamical collective of human/nonhuman "makers," this place has turned into mere scenery. Following the same cognitive suppression of the physical world, many human activities fatally concur with (partly natural) phenomena like subsidence and eustatism, favoring the crumbling of this fragile body of land and water.[7] And so, in Venice's "picturesque setting," thousands of ferries, working and private boats, along with the unstoppable flux of extra-large cruise ships docking in San Marco Square, cause a supplement of wave power that shatters the palace walls, eroding the *caranto* piles that constitute the city's foundations. Other factors, such as the reclamation of the industrial area, or the enclosing of (sometimes illegal and often unsustainable) fisheries, amplify the high tides phenomenon. Once storage spaces for tidewaters, these areas become now unserviceable: "Less absorption surface, more incoming water, land sinking, sea-level rise, disappearance of natural barriers: these are all little tiles of the puzzle composing Venice's ruin" (Fabbri 2003: 48–49).[8]

Today, in spite of a number of important studies and requests coming from the citizens, the prevailing approach to the protection of Venice and its lagoon continues with the practice of textual misinterpretations. Instead of promoting ecologically sustainable measures, the national and local governments have chosen to safeguard this delicate geo-ecological balance from the water by closing the harbor mouth with a mechanical system of dams. The so-called MOSE project (an acronym for Modulo Sperimentale Elettro-Meccanico, Experimental Electromechanical Module) is at once one of the biggest financial businesses in Italy and the latest misreading of the city's material textuality. In fact, not only is this "monstrous solution" (De Lucia 2013: 90) strongly impacting the lagoon's ecosystem, but it is already proving insufficient for its purpose. Also sadly "anti-historical" is that, ever since the project started in 1988, MOSE has been draining all the money allocated for the protection of

the lagoon (some 6 billion euros).[9] In June 2014, judicial investigations evinced a dense network of unlawful speculations, resulting in the conviction of thirty-five people, including Venice's former mayor Giorgio Orsoni.

"All that intelligence and hard work created in times past, intelligence and hard work have now to preserve," wrote Goethe in 1786. Today we know his historical optimism was most likely unjustified.

Text II: Industry

Goethe visited Venice twice. On his second journey, in 1790, he made an important discovery of comparative anatomy. Walking on the Lido, not far from the Jewish cemetery, he found a fragmented sheep skull. Accomplishing a long research, through these bones he could empirically observe what he formulated as "*die Wirbeltheorie des Schädel*," the vertebral theory of the skull: just as the plant's various parts result from the metamorphosis of the leaf, so the skull is the vertebrae's extreme modification. A little more than a century later, on the same Lido, Mann's character Gustav von Aschenbach dies of cholera while backlit looking at a Polish boy bathing in the sea. As a final act of metamorphosis and demise, that Lido itself will be severely altered at the end of the 1960s, mutilated by the reclamation works ordered to make room for industry. More offense will come later from building developers, but this is yet another story.[10]

At the time of the Lido's reclamation, industry was already a consolidated element of the Venetian landscape. To make the lagoon's industrial destination (or encouraged destiny) even clearer, there was the threatening voice of the 1962 Land Use Plan (still valid in 1990), which so decreed: "The industrial area of Porto Marghera will chiefly contain those plants emitting smoke, dust or health-impairing fumes in the atmosphere, releasing polluting substances into the water, and producing vibrations and noises" (quoted in Casson 2007: 315–16).[11] Again, the suppression of Venice's material text in this development narrative is recklessly patent. And it is also patently uncanny, if one considers the magnitude of this artificial satellite, launched into Venice's orbit: "18 kilometers [more than 11 miles] of navigable waterways, 33 km [20.5 miles] of docks, and over 2000 hectares of industrialized peninsulas that, like metastases, [spread] into water" (Fabbri 2003: 37–8).

What does the Petrolchimico look like?[12] The Venetian magistrate Felice Casson provides a description that matches Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, but with a substantial difference: the Petrolchimico is indeed very visible. And smellable, too:

> A true city, entirely surrounded by high walls, not far from Marghera's residential area, with miles and miles of inner roads and little streets, bordering on the lagoon. From here, in the distance, you [can] see Venice and its belfries. But if you [turn] around, you [see] the endless pipes, thin and huge, new and old, rusty and repaired, whole or creatively patched up, at the ground level as well as 15 meters high or more, endlessly long, straight or crooked. They [enter] in mysterious hangars and barracks, whence they [get] out, just to chase other hangars and barracks in a senseless, unfathomable labyrinth. [Everything is] merged in pungent and acrid smells, sometimes sweetish, sometimes intolerable, among fumes and gas spills of any color and extension. (Casson 2007: 34–5)

More than a satellite, industrial Venice materializes here as "a planet fallen into sea" (Marchiori 2003: 127), an anti-Venice. In fact, the above-ground face of Marghera is the macabre, grotesque, and surreal pendant of Venice's watery underworld. In a chemical surrealism, the elemental hybridity of this city is forced to merge with other elements, unknown, unexpected, frightening, and unforgiving. The human, and the living in general, are here only disposable wedges in the cannibal mechanism of the development narrative.

But this "futurist" chapter of Venetian history had been inaugurated well before the time of artificial satellites and space exploration. Exactly one year before Thomas Mann's journey to Venice (and four before the beginning of the First World War), the theorist of Futurism Filippo Tommaso Marinetti cast a spell *Against Passéist Venice* (*Contro Venezia passatista*), which was one with his ruinous military idealism.[13] It was April 27, 1910:

> We repudiate the old Venice, enfeebled and undone by centuries of worldly pleasure, though we too once loved and possessed it in a great nostalgic dream.
>
> We repudiate the Venice of foreigners, a market for counterfeiting antiquarians, a magnet of snobbery and universal imbecility, a bed whose bottom has been staved in by caravans of lovers, the bejeweled hip-bath of cosmopolitan courtesans, the *cloaca maxima* of passéism.
>
> We want to cure and heal this putrefying city, this magnificent sore from the past. We want to reanimate and ennoble the Venetian people, fallen from

> their ancient grandeur, drugged by the morphine of nauseating cowardice and debased by the habit of shady business.
>
> We want to prepare the birth of an industrial and military Venice that can dominate the Adriatic Sea, that great Italian lake.
>
> Let us hasten to fill in its little reeking canals with the ruins from its leprous and crumbling palaces.
>
> Let us burn the gondolas, rocking chairs for cretins, and raise to the heavens the imposing geometry of metal bridges and factories plumed with smoke, to abolish the cascading curves of the old architecture.
>
> Let the reign of divine Electric Light finally come to liberate Venice from its venal moonlight for furnished rooms to let. (Marinetti et al. 2009: 67–68)

"Let the reign of divine Electric Light finally come," Marinetti said. And divine Electric Light came into Venice by way of Giuseppe Volpi, first Count of Misurata. Volpi, who would later become Mussolini's Minister of Finances and the Governor of Italy's colony of Tripolitania in Libya (hence his title of nobility), was the owner of SADE, at that time the major Italian corporation for the production of electric energy. (It is remarkable that, in 1963, SADE will be liable for one of the biggest environmental disasters of Italian history, the provoked collapse of a mountain into the reservoir of the Vajont dam.[14]) Volpi had promoted the creation of an "industrial Venice" to be placed in an area of the lagoon that had to be previously reclaimed and filled with ground. This area would become Porto Marghera, and the general agreement for its construction—engaging the city council and private entrepreneurs, with Volpi in the first row—was made in 1917. The land, which was state-owned, was conceded to the industrial group completely free of charge.[15]

Porto Marghera was located in an agricultural site near the railways connecting Venice with the mainland. Meant to be Venice's industrial harbor, it was built on the sediment removed from the lagoon while digging the canals for the new settlement. In 1919, the first industrial plants had been completed, and in 1920–1 Marghera was already host to metallurgic factories and units for the production of sulfuric acid. Around 1923 the manufacturing plants already numbered twenty-seven, "including those for coal and mineral oils distillation, shipbuilding, and metallurgic industries, all powered with the energy furnished by the SADE corporation" (Fabbri 2003: 26). In 1929, the factories were fifty-five, out of which fifteen produced chemicals. The workers were

around 10,000. A considerable urban expansion began to surround the industrial area. In 1932 there were 5,000 residents (today there are about 28,000).

Besides being the story of an environmental trauma, that of Marghera is also the story of a dense concentration of industrial and financial interests, binding together the main industrial corporations in Italy and beyond.[16] And, unsurprisingly, it is also a story of war: Marghera, in fact, was a production site for yperite or sulphur mustard, the infamous "mustard gas" used by the Italian army in Ethiopia and Libya in 1936, in spite of the Geneva Protocol of 1925. Predictably, the Venetian industrial site also became a "sensitive target" during the First World War.

In the 1950s, the age of petrochemical production begins. The former corporations operating in Marghera merge in a new company named "Edison," which will become "Montedison" after merging with Monsanto and Union Carbide (the owner of Bhopal's Union Carbide factory in India). In 1951, on a new expanse of land (called Industrial Zone II), the production of chlorine and polyvinyl chloride (PVC) starts: Italy enters the plastic era. Certainly, in these wealthy years of "well-mannered" tycoons and enlightened working classes, ecological or "merely aesthetic" concerns are not part of any political agenda.

As a symbol—at once ironic and gruesome—of the material textuality of this place, we can take the building of Industrial Zone II. Whereas the first industrial site was constructed on clean ground, the foundations of Industrial Zone II were assembled using the chemical and metallurgical sludge of the "early days." This sludge accumulated near sandbanks, transforming them into big peninsulas of chemical waste: "To put it bluntly, it was an industrial site laying on a humongous toxic dump, quantifiable in 10 million tons" (Fabbri 2003: 41). Interpreted as a text, this site is a material *mise en abyme* of the whole pollution system, almost a metaphysical self-representation of toxicity.

Obviously, the whole existence of the Petrolchimico comes at an immeasurable price for the natural and social ecology of the lagoon. Unbelievable amounts of hazardous pollutants are produced over the decades, despite the denunciations of people, workers, environmental associations, and notwithstanding systems of rules intended to protect public health. Investigations on the impairment and the state of the lagoon's seabed report the presence of over seven and a half million cubic meters of toxic and poisonous sludge. These hazardous substances include heavy metals, fluorogypsum, phosphogypsum

(radioactive elements), dioxins, many sorts of chlorinated hydrocarbons, bauxite, sulfuric acid, mercury, aluminum, and all the possible by-products of petrochemical industry.[17] Faced with this "horror movie" (Pergolizzi 2012: 12), the story that Marghera tells is therefore also one of irresponsibility, deceit, and stubborn denial. In this story, the pursuit of industrial and financial interests became so "absolute" (that is, so abstract) as to falsify the texts of reality in form of territory, people's rights and health, an age-old landscape and the lagoon's ecological balance. In order to accumulate profit, this absolute industrial narrative became literally world-less.

As a matter of fact, ever since its foundation, the Marghera petrochemical factory had produced the most dangerous agents (including dioxin and phosgene), systematically keeping the workers uninformed about their noxiousness, occulting and manipulating scientific reports, which were already available from the 1950s and 1960s. As those reports had made clear, many of those substances were carcinogenic, mutagenic, namely able to cause alteration to DNA, and teratogenic, namely able to negatively influence the fetus' development.[18] In 1973, the World Health Organization officially declared the carcinogenicity of PVC's basic component, vinyl chloride monomer (VCM). The most frequent diseases caused by this substance include cirrhosis, hepatopathologies, and brain, lung, and liver cancer. Despite these evidences, however, the Petrolchimico's production continued. In the 1980s Marghera finally became an environmental case for its systematic practice of dumping in the lagoon toxic pollutants such as sludge from the production of aluminum, zinc, sulfuric, and fluorhydric acid. As documented by Legambiente, until the end of 1988—and for at least two decades—some four thousand tons of phosphogypsum were poured every day into the sea (Legambiente 2005: 36). The lagoon, Bevilacqua notes, "has now turned into a private landfill for [these] factories" (Bevilacqua 1998: 147). This reckless practice ceased (at least officially) only in 1988, but for some years that sludge continued to be processed and used as the basis for construction and road-making materials. After that date, many of those substances were illegally dumped in Africa, or sank in the Mediterranean Sea on board the so-called "ships of poison," secretly wretched ships clandestinely loaded with tons of all sorts of hazardous pollutants.[19]

In a long and important memoir titled *La fabbrica dei veleni* (*The Poison Factory*, 2007), the magistrate Felice Casson demonstrates that, in

the decades of Porto Marghera's industrial flourishing, the Petrolchimico's chief executive officers did their best to bury all the medical and scientific evidence related to the actual toxicity of the substances produced in the factory. The studies conducted by international researchers and by Italian physicians in particular (a leading role was played by the factory doctor Pier Luigi Viola and the oncologist Cesare Maltoni) were deliberately ignored or boycotted in a game of transatlantic industrial complicities exclusively aimed at continuing production, regardless of the costs for the workers' health. Casson's investigations evince a "secrecy protocol" binding the world's major petrochemical corporations: "A criminal and generalized 'pact of silence', agreed upon in 1972–3 by all the leaders of the world's [petrochemical] industries. This agreement was promoted by European corporations, with Montedison in the front row" (Casson 2007: 31). Accordingly, the results of the epidemiological research—when research was not stopped from the outset—should remain top secret. The workers and residents of the industrial areas were either not notified about the risks, or "served" other, more reassuring information about the toxicity of the chemical agents produced in the factory. Casson writes: "Although aware of the horrible truth, for years Montedison continued to keep everybody in the dark, in particular those who were the most directly concerned: workers" (Casson 2007: 295).

In this story, many forms of justice are missing: social, ecological, historical, human. Of all the thwarted rights, however, that of which the Marghera people were primarily deprived was their right to know what was really happening to them, and hence to choose about their destiny. This simple, basic thing is cognitive justice. The "horrible truth" stubbornly concealed by Montedison was, in fact, the truth of the workers' biology. The voice of the cells was telling a quite different story from the one upheld by the executives, and this story became gradually evident and understandable by the affected subjects. To speak of the voice of the cell here is not simply a metaphor. As the biosemiotician Wendy Wheeler notes, our social life, our work, the hierarchies we are placed in, are "written in our bodies in terms of flourishing or [...] illness" (Wheeler 2006: 12). In terms of our biology, the coupling of environment and body "is a form of conversation, [...] a kind of narrative of conversational developments" (Wheeler 2006: 126). In this conversation, the

human body, in its immune, nervous, and endocrine systems, elaborates and keeps the memory of "the many 'not-me' which it encounters" (Wheeler 2006: 122). This memory is elaborated by our cells and shows itself in pathological forms. Hence, "It is not by looking at things that we understand them, but by dwelling in them" (Wheeler 2006: 63). To those dwelling in this reality, the cells' voice was telling a story of inner mutation, of trans-substantiation of plastic into flesh. As Nancy Tuana explains:

> Beginning at a molecular level, we know that phthalates and vinyl chloride affect, in the human and also in nonhuman animal bodies, a complex interaction that can result in cancer. Workers inhale PVC dust, and those who live by incinerators inhale it as plastics are burned. The viscous porosity of our bodies and that of PVC allow for an exchange of molecules, where PVC and phthalates pass through the porosity of skin and flesh, particularly the mucosal linings of our intestines and our lungs. Plastic becomes flesh. (Tuana 2008: 200–1)

Tuana's words describe facts taking place in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Considered against each other, the cases of Venice and New Orleans reveal some profound similarities. Like the evidence of cancer cases and pollution lays bare the hidden story of Marghera factory, Katrina too exposes the plots of reality told by some important material texts of New Orleans: contaminated body cells, the hierarchical organization of living spaces, the dying bodies of people suffering from exploitation and lack of protection.

In New Orleans many of these corporeal narratives were visible in the waters of the Mississippi River, on which they lifelessly floated, or in the Louisiana Superdome, where they were kept prisoners for days. Marghera's bodily stories were in turn denied for many years, and it was not easy to tear the drapes of hostile complicities surrounding the events. To make the picture gloomier is that, when these stories were reported to the factory's sanitary officers, they were either belittled or attributed to other causes—excessive drinking or smoking, for example. But however unhealthy drinking and smoking might be, a systematic association between them and pathologies as complex and rare such as hepatic angiosarcoma is hard to prove, especially in such high epidemiological rates. And yet, rather than stopping the production, the Petrolchimico's executives and sanitary authorities recommended that the workers use special toothpaste, or drink milk. To prevent "problems," workers were even instructed to operate wearing anti-gas masks.

In the 1960s, after strong struggles, the factory started to quantify the risk economically and to compensate the workers for being exposed to substances known as poisonous and toxic. Even though this might appear a step forward, this policy meant to accept ridiculous compensations and a slight salary increase only for those people working in the factory units where PVC was manufactured. In several cases, the unions backed this compensation policy, which as a matter of fact was an obstacle for further negotiations in favor of the laborers. This makes them partly co-responsible for the damages inflicted to laborers themselves. Moreover, complaints of the workers about their health conditions were in some cases disregarded even by the agencies that were supposed to protect their rights.[20]

Finally, in 1998, a trial was ordered. Instrumental to it were the denunciations made by the workers themselves, who became here "experts and activists even unto death" (Garrard 2012: 509). Decisive in this respect were the efforts of Gabriele Bortolozzo, who, with an admirable mix of social engagement and self-made scientific expertise, built an archive of all the medical records of Marghera's victims. Supported by allies such as Greenpeace and the medical organization Medicina Democratica, Bortolozzo's files were crucial not only to start a widespread campaign against the chemical pollution in the lagoon, but also to instruct this historic trial against the Petrolchimico's heads.

The choral story told by the medical records of 424 workers eloquently demonstrated that there was a patent connection between their pathologies and the production cycles of PVC and VCM. Courageously conducted by Felice Casson, the trial was now trying to liberate the voice of that very story. The indicted executives totaled thirty-one. The accusations were mass murder, environmental disaster, mass culpable homicide, missing workplace safety, water and food poisoning, and the construction of illegal waste dumps. In a shocking decision, however, in 2001 all the defendants were acquitted, and the State obtained from Montedison circa 300 million euros as compensation. In 2004, though, the Mestre Appeal Court reversed the verdict, sentencing five Montedison executives to serve one and a half years in jail for culpable homicide. The Cassation Court (Italy's supreme level of justice) finally confirmed this sentence. What we know today is that the Marghera petrochemical factory, now semi-abandoned and partly dismissed, is responsible

for killing 157 workers (this figure is increasing due to the pathologies' development period), and that it has caused the almost irremediable ecological degradation of Venice's lagoon. The story of this "lethal deception" is the subject of books, journalist reportages, documentary films, websites, and it is also recorded in a virtual museum.[21]

The "putrefying city" whose "leprous and crumbling" matter Filippo Tommaso Marinetti wished to "reanimate" by means of "metal bridges and factories plumed with smoke" in 1910 was dying of cancer less than a century later. And this cancer was caused by those very factories, by those very smokes. This was, after all, just another chapter of Italy's industrial dream. But this dream was, unfortunately, "absolute": it was completely disconnected from the textual evidence of reality. Marghera, and the Margheras of the world, are the price paid for all the "absolute" industrial dreams, with a peculiar detail: Marghera is not in the desert. It is up front in Venice. It *is* Venice. From there came the "magnificent sore," still open today in Venice's body.

Text III: Literature

In May in 1911, accompanied by his wife Katia and his brother Klaus, Thomas Mann finally touches Venice's body. He will give this experience a literary elaboration shortly thereafter, publishing *Der Tod in Venedig* the following year, in the October and November issues of the *Neue Rundschau*.

Much has been written about this masterpiece of modernist literature. Prominent scholars and skilled critics have seen it as a manifesto of Decadence, scrutinized the inner conflict of art and life, or analyzed the queer aesthetics of Aschenbach's voyeuristic relationship to the young Tadzio. Also particularly intense have been the explorations of the novel's autobiographical background, in search of the inspiration sources behind the protagonist's figure: in Aschenbach, it seems, Mann blended together traits of Mahler, Wagner, Nietzsche, the poet August von Platen, the painter Oswald Achenbach, of himself …[22] The points that principally draw our attention, however, are two: first, the fact that Mann's novel is a story about bodies, whose macro-category is Venice's body itself as a hybrid and collective organism; second, the fact that *Death in Venice* is also the story of how

discursive falsifications of Venice's bodily texts generate forms of cognitive injustice, culminating in death.

The novel's nature as a thick story about bodies appears immediately. From the outset of his journey, Aschenbach is prepared to experience Venice as a sensuous and hybrid landscape; this hybridity—here in the sense of elemental fusion, confusion, and ambivalence—involves everything that enters this physical space. There is a subtle but clear interdependence between the city and the bodies that inhabit it. This interdependence appears in the novel as a veiled mirroring game, in which Venice, like the protagonists' bodies, is at once bloom and withering, youth and decline. And, like in the city, these aspects are interlaced also in those very bodies. Venice's body is indeed Aschenbach's body, an elegant but also aging, decaying, unquiet, embellished body—a dirty, sweating, sublimely dying artist's body. But Venice's body is also Tadzio's body, an ineffably beautiful young body in which, however, the germ of decay resides for the very fact that this is a living body, a biologically determined *matter*. The only possibility for this body to stay beautiful would be to have its *form* frozen in time, to die. It might be for this very reason that the artist Aschenbach secretly enjoys the view of Tadzio's "jagged and pale" teeth "lacking the gleam of health," and the idea of him being "very frail," not meant to live long (Mann 2004: 62). This early death would indeed preserve his exquisite figure from corruption, just as the sea's "promised immensity," at which the boy gestures, appears perfectly unblemished in the finale. But this closing vision is only a segment of the whole, because Venice's body is not only mirrored in Tadzio and Aschenbach's bodies. It materializes indeed in all of this city's bodies, in its dirty streets and white Istria stones, its seabirds and sandbanks, its brackish waters, in its people, rich and poor, powerful and powerless. All these are members and figures (in Erich Auerbach's sense) of a collective corporeality, and they are all caught in the tangle of space-time-matter from which biology depends. This becomes even more evident in Luchino Visconti's filmic reinterpretation of the novel. Like Borges's, Visconti's Venice is "*made of crystal and twilight*" (Borges 1985: 1334, emphasis in the original), but it is also a liquefying and decomposing world, populated by feverish, excited, and often grotesque figures, whose bodily eloquence is exasperated not as much as an aesthetical feature but as an organic mode.

In the novel, Mann's decadent imagery and "dirty aesthetics" (Sullivan 2012: 515) inhibit any idealization of Venice's landscape. In his iconographic imagination, rather than Canaletto we sense Guercino, *Et in Arcadia Ego*. Death is Venice, too, and its presence is concretely embedded in this place's life. In fact, Venice is not mere landscape, here. It is not a picturesque setting, a mere background, but it is itself a character. It is a full-fledged persona in the story, a corporeal presence one can smell, feel, touch: "A repellent sultriness permeated the narrow streets, the air so thick that the odors emanating from houses, shops, and food stalls—the vapor of oil, the clouds of perfume, and more—hovered like fumes without dispersing" (Mann 2004: 62). Venice possesses its own pervasive metabolic agency. Inescapably caught in this eerie "flux" of "coexistence and intimacy" (Morton 2011: 169), Aschenbach senses that "the city had […] made him ill" (Mann 2004: 68, emphasis added). The "foul-smelling lagoon" (Mann 2004: 62) takes possession of his feverish bodymind, confusing it completely.

In some cases, this bodily presence is portrayed in gendered terms. In Mann's imagination, Venice is clearly a female figure, and, unsurprisingly, not a positive one:

> Such was Venice, the wheedling, shady beauty, a city half fairy tale, half tourist trap, in whose foul air the arts had once flourished luxuriantly and which had inspired musicians with undulating, lullingly licentious harmonies. The adventurer […] recalled, too, that the city was diseased and was concealing it out of cupidity (Mann 2004: 104).

The city's uncanny materiality culminates with the admission that another living agent has entered Venice's body. Illness is this "strange stranger, who emerges from, and constitutes, the environment" (Morton 2011: 171). In this heavily breathing, sickly sensuous atmosphere, Venice's body and all the bodies in and of Venice share the same fate.

But this fate is not due to a combination of merely material conditions—"the city was diseased and was concealing it out of cupidity" (Mann 2004: 104). Indeed, *Death in Venice* is the story of a sanitary emergency, and of the fraudulent way the city's authorities handle this emergency. The cholera outbreak is caused by a number of coalescing agencies: environmental conditions, the climate, poor hygiene, the people's state of "prevailing insecurity" (Mann 2004: 122). Fatal, however, is the way "corruption in high places,"

undermining or covering the danger, mingles with all these agencies, thereby exacerbating the epidemic. We have here a clear example of how material elements coupled with discursive practices result in a series of "often unpredictable and unwanted actions" (Alaimo 2010: 2), whose effects are fractally disseminated throughout the bodies of reality. As this case illustrates, the rim between (human) bodies and (more-than-human) environment is hardly more than an abstraction. Rather than an indistinct holism, however, we are witnessing a vast, ensnaring and puzzling "mesh" of bodies and forces. This material-discursive entrapment clutches all forms and dimensions of life. Indeed, the world's ecologies are this very entanglement, and no being, idea, or thing can exist apart from it, nor does "nature" stand as in a separate sphere, immune from the "alien" substances and polluting discourses affecting our life.[23] "What emerges here," Timothy Clark has written, "is a sense of the plurality, multiple agency and unpredictability, and compromised condition of the […] world" (Clark 2014: 80). From this "compromised condition" there is no possible "outside."

Echoing (and reversing) Marco Polo's words to the Khan in Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, Mann's Venice is therefore a larger allegory of reality. More precisely, it comes here as a figure of the world's "compromised condition," and of the condition of all bodily substances as split between purity and contamination, splendor and decay, in an elementally *hybrid* (namely, *impure*) state depending on the laws of space-time-matter. Venice, hence, is not only body *par excellence*, but also *par excellence* complexity, being itself a "compound individual" (Oppermann 2014), a super-organism made of other organisms, their lives porously connected with its life. The epitome of such interconnectedness is what Nancy Tuana has called "viscous porosity":

> There is a viscous porosity of flesh—my flesh and the flesh of the world. This porosity is a hinge through which we are of and in the world. I refer to it as viscous, for there are membranes that effect the interactions. These membranes are of various types—skin and flesh, prejudgments and symbolic imaginaries, habits and embodiments. They serve as the mediators of interaction (Tuana 2008: 199–200)

The "mediators of interaction" here are the sirocco and the fetid lagoon, body cells and police, a basket of strawberries, and the complicity between negligent authorities and the people in Venice (the "unctuous" barber, the

hotel manager, the southern joker/singer).[24] What is striking, though, is the way information is deliberately manipulated and the truth artfully disguised:

> The street corners were plastered with printed notices warning the population on behalf of the city fathers against eating oysters and mussels and using canal water because of certain gastric disorders that were only to be expected given the weather conditions. The euphemistic nature of the ordinance was clear. (Mann 2004: 98–9)

As the boundaries between "clean and unclean, sanitary and unsanitary, or the pure and the dirty" (Sullivan 2012: 528) become more and more dramatically unstable, the "human" part of the truth comes finally into sight in a clear and comprehensive picture:

> The Venetian authorities issued a statement to the effect that health conditions had never been better, then took the most essential precautions against the disease. But some food must have been contaminated […] because, denied or concealed as it was, death ate a path through the narrow streets, and the premature summer heat, which had warmed the water in the canals, was particularly conducive to its spread. […] [F]ear of the overall damage that would be done—concern over the recently opened art exhibition in the Public Gardens and the tremendous losses with which the hotels, the shops, the entire, multifaceted tourist trade would be threatened in case of panic and loss of confidence—proved stronger in the city than the love of truth and respect for international covenants: it made the authorities stick stubbornly to their policy of secrecy and denial. (Mann 2004: 122)

The echoes between this story and that of the petrochemical factory are hard to overlook. Here, too, as it will happen in Marghera, "essential precautions" are more intended to protect economic interests than life and health. Here, too, a falsifying narrative based on a "policy of secrecy and denial" provides reassuring discourses which in fact conceal and suppress the materiality of danger. Here, too, the "authorities" try to disable the alarm without really neutralizing the bomb.

In underlying these resonances, however, I am not alluding to a bizarre mimicry between art and life. What I rather mean is that literature, combined with the material texts of reality, provides theory to better understand these texts, exactly as Maurilia, Octavia, Fedora, Hypatia, Leonia, Argia, Zenobia, and all the countless invisible cities Marco Polo describes to the Kahn are

but imaginary faces to better understand the *reality* of Venice. And so, if we read literature and reality through each other in a diffractive way, we might better recognize recurring patterns: in our case, a game of unheeded material eloquence and pursued discursive deception in which cognitive justice is completely nullified. Both in Mann's Venice and in Porto Marghera, the combination of physical danger, political complicity, and textual falsification of reality produces fatal effects. As Belle Époque travelers become disposable resources for an economic system feeding on tourists, so Porto Marghera's workers taste the violence of an abstract, world-less, and brutal industrial narrative. The only difference between the two situations emerges if we consider Aschenbach's death. Aschenbach is aware of the epidemic and willfully decides to die, whereas Porto Marghera's people undergo a much more subtle coercion, accentuated by the economic blackmail that the factory plays with the community. The result, however, is the same—a lethal bodily mix of environmental exploitation, social recklessness, and cognitive distortion of reality.

Whereas Mann's novel created a conceptual framework to reading Venice's complex corporeality, Andrea Zanzotto and Marco Paolini conjure up narrative categories from Venice's very concreteness. In so doing, literature not only provides a theory to better *see* reality, but—transforming reality itself into its own story—it also provides interpretive keys to *read* reality as a material-discursive continuum, as a text. The way Zanzotto achieves this purpose is by creating a poetic imagination of Venice's invisible natures and wounded body. Paolini in turn socializes these wounds, transforming them into a performative memory that can be shared, cognized, and re-enacted. Their attempts are both permeated by an intensely ethical insight.

Andrea Zanzotto (Pieve di Soligo 1921–2011) is without any doubt one of the greatest contemporary European poets. As the American translator Patrick Barron explains, Zanzotto's "poetry delves beneath the surface of language and landscape to explore the complex mesh of culture and nature evident in his native village and the surrounding countryside—concentrations of energy within clustered locales that he terms 'archipelagoes of places'" (Barron 2007: 3). A major segment in these archipelagoes, the Venetian Lagoon stays there not merely as a place, but also as an organism, a living complexity where space and time intimately mingle in dynamics both human and inhuman.

Among the numerous compositions Zanzotto devotes to Venice, particularly interesting for our discourse are five poems forming a cycle titled "Fu Marghera (?)" ("The Late Marghera (?)," 2009) and a work of narrative prose, "Venezia, forse" ("Perhaps, Venice," 1976). In these works, Zanzotto—a poet of landscape "as a subject"—emphasizes the diverse and unresolved natures of Venice. In its natural-cultural stratifications, this is one of the places "laden with geologic, human, and nonhuman remains, all jumbled together" (Barron 2007: 4), but this is also a site of abandonment, of interstitial forces suspended between being and non-being, presence and absence.

A muddled place by definition, the lagoon is both Venice and Marghera, overflowing plenum and spectral vacuum. Zanzotto sees these paradoxes, and provides in "Venezia, forse" one of most accomplished portrays of Venice's binary textuality. As he will do again in his poems of 2009, in this dazzling prose of 1976 he strips the city of its picturesque aura, and gives it back to its weird life—a strange, quasi-zombie life, in which destructive and vivifying forces coexist along with the discordant fates of the city's storied body.

After an intensely lyrical opening, hesitating between geological vastness and a delicate coming-near, Zanzotto focuses on Venice's inner fluctuations and ambivalences. These fluctuations, he suggests, require first of all a different way of *thinking* Venice: "[E]very thought referring to it has to be located elsewhere" (Zanzotto 2013b: 88), it has to "shatter any confirmed perspective" (Zanzotto 2013b: 87). In other words, to meet Venice entirely we need to uproot ourselves from it, "entering so deep inside as to 'pierce' [it], arriving elsewhere, and seeing [this place] anew" (Giancotti 2013: 13). "Perhaps" one can approach Venice only from this elsewhere, Zanzotto suggests, or "perhaps" we can possess it only as a simulacrum, a picture in a painting, a postcard replica, or a fragment of the global touristic imagination. But, comprehended from the distance of this elsewhere, Venice appears as a whole, a round universe, in which idealized pictures make way for the material complexity of a *monstrous* ecology. And so we are here in a "world of crossings" (Zanzotto 2013b: 96), a "precarious/eternal" dimension (Zanzotto 2013b: 88) where the Adriatic sea shows "its nature of poor pool now thickened with sludge, where the purest mother-of-pearl blends with the shady rainbows of industrial dejections" (Zanzotto 2013b: 89), where "pus and

petroleum, phosgene and worms […], incompetence and vain ambition, are […] facts" (Zanzotto 2013b: 108). As the poet says:

> Humans and things find themselves together in asking for help against the near furnaces for chlorine and phosgene, against the black magic that fertilizes all earth with death. Quite different from the traditional myth of the "death in Venice" is the one looming from Marghera and from the whole womb of the dry land, whose horizons are worm-eaten by the encastellations and towers of industry. (Zanzotto 2013b: 103)

To accept Venice's conflicting natures means to go past the metanarratives enshrouding this place, whether of "absolute beauty" or "industrial progress." Beauty, Zanzotto maintains along with Mann, is not disconnected from the materiality of its object; it is not *ab-solute*. Hence, it implies decay, corruption, and death: every living matter is, *sub specie aeternitatis*, a corpse. "Industrial progress," on the other side, is an abstraction: it is so in that it cuts off its substantive processes of withdrawal, transformation, consumption, and pollution from the concreteness of the world's bodies. The very success of modern industry depends on this abstraction, and therefore it is, like beauty, not *ab-solute*, not severed from materiality. In that it mesmerizes governments, decision makers, and workers, "industrial progress" is as deceitful as "black magic." But the world it leaves behind is not simply a world of death. This world is, as Zanzotto suggests in "Fu Marghera (?)," a world *undead*: a "death of deaths" (Zanzotto 2009: 57), a "pure excesses of death of the selfsame death":

> Vacant as cratered teeth
> disparate framings and fillings of nullity
> […] dislocation collapse
> the stripping away of colors and forms of nullity
> that nowhere turned more fertile
> than in this wrecked beat welter
> […] forces booted out but hardly
> quashed […]
> generative in being
> pure excesses of death of the selfsame death.
> (Zanzotto 2009: 55, trans. Patrick Barron)[25]

With its enduring creativity of forces manifesting themselves in the mutagen and teratogenic power of pollutants, this world stays indeed eerily "generative."

It performs itself in "the zone of restless and perplexing activity from which monsters arrive, a […] contact zone in which the human reveals the monster always already enfolded in whatever dispersed amalgamation we are" (Cohen 2013b: 273). This "death of deaths" is thus not a domain of life but a world of indefinitely suspended death, a parenthetical question mark after "the late," a world in which body cells, offended by the toxicity of chemicals and discourses, ask for the ultimate "return of death as a lesser harm" (Zanzotto 2009: 60).

This strange world *undead*, however, also offers a chance of solidarity for getting together humans and nonhumans, because "the haunting of monsters reveals communal values, shared aspirations and lived ethics […] as well as the coinhabitance and alien thriving of the nonhuman" (Cohen 2013b: 273). In Zanzotto's prose, this shocking coinhabitance has, always already, ethical and cognitive disclosures:

> The most distressingly strident couple in the world, Venice fastened together with Mestre-Marghera (which one is the living, which one is the corpse?), all of a sudden challenges you to a salvaging suture through the obscenity of the real and of the present; it challenges you […] to "move further" […] toward a never-seen where even evil could be stopped, emptied of its power, and rehabilitated as a sign, a trace, a form. (Zanzotto 2013b: 104–5)

Like living body and corpse, the mother-of-pearl blended with "industrial dejections," matter and anti-matter, Venice and Marghera—this anti-Venice—are one and the same. To see Venice means to see this living monstrosity. As an alternative, we should concur with Giorgio Agamben that Venice is no longer a corpse, but rather a specter, a "blabbering" presence "left to drain on the *fondamente*, together with rotten algae and plastic bottles" (Agamben 2011: 11).

But, if we really want "to move further," we have to transform mourning into cognition, and develop new ways of seeing that stop the evil, as Zanzotto demands. And this is just what a material-textual interpretation of all the "implicit Venices" aims at: stopping the evil and rehabilitating it as a sign. To see Venice (which is the same as to see the world) is to embrace all these contradictions and recognize them as signifying parts of a whole. It means to recognize the world as a place of unremitting interferences, encounters and concoctions. In this "moving-further," even beyond the Aristotelian principle

of noncontradiction ("which one is the living, which one is the corpse?" Zanzotto asks), is the key to understanding the many wounds of this huge body of which we are part.

Even more than novels and poetic prose, theater can contribute to socialize these wounds. One of the most original and *engagé* Italian playwrights, Marco Paolini (b. in Belluno in 1956) is the author of a number of plays that enact what he calls "*teatro civico*," "a civic theater": long monologues about events of the recent past, often, but not exclusively, from an Italian standpoint (his most celebrated works are about two socio-environmental catastrophes, both displaying an underground connection to Venice: Vajont and Bhopal).[26] In these acts of "narrative resistance," partly inspired by Nobel laureate Dario Fo's political theater, a collective civil memory is reconstructed as a necessary operation of cognitive justice. Venice is "implicit" in many of Paolini's plays, but it emerges as the subject of two of them: *Il Milione: Quaderno veneziano* (*The Million: A Venetian Notebook*, 1997) and *Parlamento chimico: Storie di plastica* (*Chemical Parliament: Plastic Stories*, 2001). Whereas the first play is an ironic and surreal travel in Venice's hybrid world as narrated by a weirdly *redivivus* Marco Polo, the latter is about Porto Marghera and it is a unique oeuvre in Italian contemporary dramaturgy.

Parlamento chimico: Storie di plastica is based on an impressive amount of data, including historical documents, the workers' medical records, the proceedings of the trial against the heads of the petrochemical factory, scientific and technological descriptions of the production processes, and many personal stories of people living inside or near the factory. Here again, the "narrative agents" are material. As Paolini says in an interview: "In my narrative style, [individual] characters are […] the substance; through their bodies and words the story materializes. In *Storie di plastica*, in turn, productive processes and plants play the leading role; finance, chlorine: they have now become my characters" (quoted in Marchiori 2003: 79). The factory itself emerges as a body. Paolini portrays this body as a naked body, so naked that one can almost picture it through X-rays: "you see the whole skeleton and all the nerves, the circulatory system and the inner organs of the factory: cracking towers, refinery plants, autoclaves, pipes" (quoted in Marchiori 2003: 38). Looking into this inorganic nudity creates a new, industrial porn:

> Naked factories that, when the lights are turned on, let you glimpse their circulatory system, their organs … this is porn. Therefore men like it. I know of many people seduced at night by the petrochemical factories spread in the landscape: this is something that lures mostly males, with all those fires, lights, structures …[27]

This obscenity is the same that Zanzotto saw in the ambivalent corpse/body of Venice. The present, for Paolini like for Zanzotto, is obscene. Still more so if one considers the circularity between such obscenity and the discursive obscenity of the Italian industrial narrative: all this is obscene not because it reveals too much, but because it hides what should be shown. This lack of transparency explains the title of the play: Marghera's *Plastic Stories* call into question a *Chemical Parliament*, because they hold accountable for this narrative not only industrials and managers, but also the obscure maneuvers of an entire ruling class. As Fernando Marchiori observes, "moving inside the labyrinth of the petrochemical factory, of its plants, productions, struggles and judicial acts […] means drawing […] a geography of environmental crime in the lagoon's fragile ecosystem, a geography of the whole Italian blind industrial development" (Marchiori 2003: 38). This "blind industrial development" would have never been possible outside a thick web of political complicities.

In the play, Paolini connects facts and framework into a narrative "civic" memory, thus creating a game of mirroring and resonances within the naked and wounded bodies of reality. And so Marghera becomes a *figure* of all the Margheras of the world, near and far. It is Bhopal, with its "accidental" fatalities and the policy of "secret and denial" of corporate capitals, but it is also the archetypal category of the global theaters of war, from the First and Second World Wars to more recent conflicts.[28] Marghera plants can "help us picture the VCM factory bombed in Belgrade, and the euphorizing sweetish-tasting cloud, which goes unnoticed, cover by smoke and the exploding bombs" (Marchiori 2003: 39). Performed in front of an audience of workers (who are themselves textual matter on which this story is written), of informed citizens and of common people, the play echoes reality indefinitely, and in so doing it produces multiple reverberations of meanings. It is worth noting that the preparatory representation—a "narrative attempt," "*prova di racconto*"—of *Parlamento chimico* took place in 2001 in Castiglioncello, Tuscany, near the

Solvay petrochemical plant of Piombino, an "associate" of Montedison: the Marghera factory's story was thus set within another similarly storied factory. And so Paolini's play connects all these people, with all these places, with all the pieces of this puzzle. Literature is helping reality to perform itself and its interconnectedness via the story, the stage, and the audience. This is a practice of civil resistance and narrative liberation.

Put on stage in Venice in 2003, during the Carnival, and right after the second sentence of the Marghera trial, *Parlamento chimico* is the story of a political failure in front of matter's textuality. As Paolini has said:

> The language of politics does not include the admission of failure. Its narrative "art" is conventionally structured as to always tell things in terms of defense, consolidation. But who shall tell failures, if no politician will care to do it? (quoted in Marchiori 2003: 155)

Venice's bodies do, if we read them with honesty. And literature does it too. It does it by transforming evils into signs, thus liberating the voices of reality.

Text: World

The way we, not only as ecocritics, but as intellectuals in general, relate to the material eloquence of the world is important. It involves, in fact, a reflection on the ethical role of the humanities in crafting tools apt to understand the tangles of material agencies, socio-ecological sustainability, and human responsibilities. To read the world as a text, and to perform accurate interpretations of this textuality, is not only ecologically correct, but also a necessary way to create social forms of cognitive justice, and hence practices of political liberation and environmental responsiveness.

The significance of this approach is clear: whenever the "text" of the world is misread, uncontrollable consequences ensue. This misreading happens all the times we believe that the boundaries between "the outside" and "the inside" are firm and solid; it happens when we think of the "world outside" as inert matter and we imagine it as unrelated to the "world inside." It happens all the times we set up an alienated relationship to reality. Whenever this occurs, we fall into

> a mass hallucinatory fantasy in which the megatons of waste we dump in our rivers and bays are not poisoning the water, the hydrocarbons we pump into the air are not changing the climate, overfishing is not depleting our oceans, fossil fuel will never run out, wars that kill masses of civilians are an appropriate way to keep our hands on what's left, we are not desperately overdrawn at the environmental bank, and, really, the kids are all right. (Kingsolver 2003: 13)

An alienated relationship (and, therefore, a misinterpretation) of reality is also the one that leads ecomafia clans to intersperse densely populated areas with toxic waste, areas where their own families—and they themselves—live. In their criminal hallucination, they act as if they do not have to breathe the same air, drink the same water, eat the same food produced in that land, or live in houses built on polluted ground. But this happens also when industrial policies are disconnected from their environmental concreteness.

A city always hovering above itself, Venice has fallen prey to the narrative of industrial development, an alienated narrative not necessarily contemplating the existence of reality as it is. This narrative has a characteristic feature, namely, that of deciding which elements to include in the story, which voices to allow to speak, and to which actors to assign the main role. It is a narrative often built in advance and hard to reconcile with the reality of things. It is based on the oversimplification of complex dynamics and it relies on an arbitrary and disputable "editing"—one that leaves outside the truly revelatory elements, those that give a sense to the story. But, in spite of all this, the picture emerging in the final frame is impossible to control. This final frame is death in Venice, or, if you prefer, the deaths and lives that Venice holds in itself. The aim of this chapter was exactly this: to rewrite or rebuild the narrative about Venice and about death and life in Venice privileging a different logic from that of the "official narratives." This logic is not linear, but "emergent." Things originate from an indissoluble reciprocity; they emerge as a collective in which human and nonhuman players act together. In this ontological interaction and co-emergence, material and discursive dynamics blend with each other and have an equally formative role in the constitution of reality.

Barry Commoner's first law of ecology reads: "Everything is connected to everything else. There is one ecosphere for all living organisms and what affects one, affects all" (Commoner 1971: 33). However empirically hard to prove, this "law" is helpful to understand our discourse. If we think that most

of the plastic composing the infamous Great Pacific Plastic Patch consists of PVC and related substances, essentially deriving from petroleum; if we think how these disquieting bodily presences interact with the sea's biodiversity, oceanic streams, the atmosphere, climate, and (via the food chain) our own life; and if we consider that this oceanic plastic was produced in industrial plants like Marghera (or like Bhopal, or New Orleans), using the same procedures, creating the same pollution, generating the same diseases, exploiting and cognitively defrauding people in the same way, and participating in the same deceitful industrial narratives—whereas "corruption in the high places" means death in the lower ones, whether human or not—then we will admit that Commoner might be on the right track, and that there is a possible connection between the tiles of the mosaic. Like the cholera and death in Venice, the global warming that threatens to erase a lagoon in northern Italy is also due to concurring factors, which include "natural" agents as well as human discourses, sometimes apparently distant from each other, but deeply intertwined in their effects. Heeding the world's material narratives is the way we, as intellectuals who believe in reality, try to see all these apparently disconnected elements as parts of a wide story, and to make sense of this story.[29] As our existential duty, we have to responsibly discard falsifying narratives and follow the eloquence of things. If we listen to it, this eloquence will "force [our] way 'upstream' toward the sources of pollution, which are also often the loci of immense social and political power" (Garrard 2012: 509).

In the material story we have drawn here, there is room for the immense power of politics and industry as well as for the lagoon's hybrid forces. We spot in this narrative unchosen elemental proximities, high tide, my PVC boots, San Marco Square at night, Marghera's cracking towers, the workers, tourists, big ships, the cells' unheard voices, and all the invisible natures disguised in forms different from these ones. Maybe not capriciously, we put all these elements into a wider frame, doing as if these apparently disconnected units would be fragments of one picture, chapters of one text. Because, beneath all cities visible and invisible, the text we are called to read is much vaster, and it *is* one. This text is our world.

"What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?"



I libri generano libri. Venice, 2012. Courtesy of Christian Arpaia.

Notes

1 The idea of "diffraction" and of "diffractive reading" comes from Haraway (1997; 2008) and Barad (2007), and from the elaboration that material ecocriticism has made of this practice by which text and world, the cultural and the natural, are read "not in separation," but "through one another" (Iovino and Oppermann 2014a: 9). On this point, see Iovino 2015.

2 On the *Serenissima*'s "hunger for wood" and forest management, see Bevilacqua 1998: 70–89.

3 On the complex history of the lagoon management, see at least Scano 2009.

4 The lagoon lies in a point of the Adriatic Sea where some of the greatest rivers of northern Italy have their natural mouth: Isonzo, Tagliamento, Piave, Sile, Brenta, Adige, and Bacchiglione. Some of these rivers were diverted in order to prevent the silting-up of the lagoon; cf. Bevilacqua 1998: 111–27.

5 When Goethe visited Venice, proper sewage systems did not exist, and urban waste was also disposed in the lagoon. Today, however, the situation is not much better. Not only a sewage system is still missing, but the lagoon has

definitely become an open cesspool for collecting all the wastewaters of the mainland region.

6 Cf. Bevilacqua 1998: 140; see also De Lucia 2013: 86–90; Salzano 2011.

7 Subsidence, natural or human-made land sinking, "is primarily due to the drawing of groundwater […], especially in the industrial area of Marghera. From 1950 to 1970 the average lowering of the soil in the Venice area was approximately 12 cm." Eustatism, namely the sea-level rise, is due instead to global climatic variations—"from the beginning of the last century to the '70s, the eustatic rise in Venice was 9 cm […]. These two processes have contributed to the change over time of the average sea level, which currently is about 26 cm […] higher than that of 1897." See http://www.comune.venezia.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/EN/IDPagina/1844 (accessed December 12, 2014).

8 Many of the tiles of this puzzle are the subjects of "Occhi aperti su Venezia," a series of short but extremely accurate books published (often in Italian and English bilingual version) by Corte del Fontego Editore and authored by some of the major experts of Venice's history and current crises. On tourism, for example, see Lanapoppi 2011 and Tantucci 2011; on cruise ships, see Testa 2011 and Tattara 2014; on land reclamation and the lagoon's hydrogeological balance, see Somma 2012 and Fersuoch 2013. For a complete list: http://www.cortedelfontego.it/web/?OCCHI_APERTI_SU_VENEZIA (accessed June 19, 2015). In different methodological perspective compared to this chapter, a very important account on the topic of Venice's death due to a "loss of memory" comes from Settis 2014, a beautifully written text which also takes the *Serenissima*'s fate as universal cautionary tale.

9 See the news on the Italian newspaper *Il Sole 24 ore*'s website (http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/notizie/2014-06-05/scandalo-mose-venezia-corruzione-italia-persiste-e-scoraggia-investitori-esteri-144510.shtml?uuid=ABWAPKOB) and on the *New York Times*'s site (http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/05/world/europe/venice-mayor-is-arrested-on-corruption-charges.html?_r=0). Links accessed November 20, 2014. On MOSE see also Fersuoch 2014.

10 See Pontani 2011.

11 The irony of the word "contain" is here remarkable. Presumably, in fact, Marghera's site did *not* (and could not) "contain," namely enclose in itself, these pollutants. I thank Greg Garrard for drawing my attention to this point.

12 Montedison, Enimont, Enichem, and more recently Vinyls: these are only some of corporate names of Venice's petrochemical factory. I will refer to it simply as the "Petrolchimico."

13 Marinetti, like many other Italian intellectuals at the time (i.e. Giuseppe Ungaretti, Luigi Pirandello), was a convinced interventionist in the years conducive to the First World War. In influential texts such as *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1914) and *War: The World's Only Hygiene* (1915), he viewed and represented war as an embodiment of the modern, an aesthetic spectacle, a festive event, and as a means towards a necessary renewal of society. These principles resonate with his hatred of "passéism," here personified by Venice. For discussing this point with me, I thank Enrico Cesaretti, who—to my knowledge—is also the author of the only ecocritical study on Marinetti written so far (see Cesaretti 2016).

14 The subject of a series of studies, the Vajont case has been declared by the UNESCO the first of five "cautionary tales," caused by "the failure of engineers and geologists." So reads the "cautionary tale" on the UNESCO website: "The Vajont reservoir disaster is a classic example of the consequences of the failure of engineers and geologists to understand the nature of the problem that they were trying to deal with. During the filling of the reservoir a block of approximately 270 million cubic metres detached from one wall and slid into the lake at velocities of up to 30 metres per second (approx. 110 kilometres per hour). As a result a wave overtopped the dam by 250m and swept onto the valley below, with the loss of about 2,500 lives. The dam remained unbroken by the flood and is still there today. Proper understanding of the geology of the hillside would have prevented the disaster. Vajont […] was built as a part to provide hydroelectricity for the rapidly-expanding northern cities of Milan, Turin, and Modena. A proposal to site a dam at this location was made in the 1920s […]" (http://en.lswn.it/press-releases/international-year-of-planet-earth-global-launch-event-12-13-february-2008/). As it appears from this "tale," the narrative of the "reign of divine Electric Light" was taking material shape in the 1920s. In the terms of our discourse, if engineers and geologists had not culpably provided a wrong interpretation of this material textuality, this disaster would not have occurred. On this episode, see also Armiero 2011: 174–94.

15 On the financial aspects (and conflicts of interests) connected to Marghera's industrial conversion, see Scano 2009: 15–43; Chinello 1979; Dorigo 1973. Scano explicitly talks of "institutional disaggregation and predatory development" (Scano 2009: 15).

16 SAVA furnished aluminum alloys, ILVA the iron and steel products, whereas the Montecatini provided the chemical agents necessary to transform mineral and petroliferous products. All these corporations are part of the (not always happy)

history of Italian industrial capitalism. On this history, see e.g. F. Barca 1999; Trento 2012.

17 I take these data from Pergolizzi 2012: 43, and from Legambiente 2005: 36–3-7.

18 Cf. Fabbri 2003: 70; see also Casson 2007.

19 The history of Porto Marghera, briefly summarized here, is meticulously explained by the natural scientist and Greenpeace activist Fabrizio Fabbri in his volume *Porto Marghera e la Laguna di Venezia*. See also Rabitti 1998, and Bettin and Dianese 2003. On Marghera's trial there is also a graphic novel by Claudio Calia, *Porto Marghera: La legge non è uguale per tutti* (2007). Casson 2007 remains a fundamental reference.

20 Very clear on this point is Casson 2007: 99–107.

21 Founded in 1998, the "Associazione Gabriele Bortolozzo" is active in Mestre, near Marghera. The virtual tour of the Association's museum is available online: http://agb.provincia.venezia.it/Attivita/Museo/Museo.html (accessed November 21, 2014). An important documentary titled *Porto Marghera: Inganno letale* [*Porto Marghera: A Lethal Deception*] was shot by Paolo Bonaldi in 2002. Other documentaries include Alessandro Gaeta's *Nero di vongole* (2000), Andreas Pichler's *Teorema Venezia/The Venice Syndrome* (2012), and Irene Sollazzo's *Vinyls: Lavoratori di plastica* (2013).

22 For a discussion about these aspects, see, among many others, Schede 2006; Shookman 2003. For a more general overview, see Lenhert and Wessel 2004.

23 As Morton put it: "The mesh of interconnected things is vast, perhaps immeasurably so. Each entity in the mesh looks strange. Nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is fully 'itself'. […] Our encounter with other beings becomes profound. They are strange, even intrinsically strange. Getting to know them makes them stranger. When we talk about life forms, we're talking about *strange strangers*. The ecological thought imagines a multitude of entangled strange strangers" (Morton 2010: 15).

24 See Mann 2004: 97–8, 108, 114.

25 The complete text of "Fu Marghera (?)"—(1) reads:

> Vacant as cratered teeth
> disparate framings and fillings of nullity
> abandonment is neither
> death nor freedom
> abandonment is dislocation collapse
> the stripping away of colors and forms of nullity
> that nowhere turned more fertile
> than in this wrecked beat welter

withered flickerings of nothing
are tongueless mouths burnt skins
forces booted out but hardly
quashed or pataphysical in black in ash
unmasked, detoured, generative in being
pure excesses of death of the selfsame death.

An English version of the cycle "Fu Marghera (?)" is so far unavailable. Patrick Barron agreed to translate part 1 for me. I am grateful to him for his generous help.

26 *Il racconto del Vajont* (1996) and *Bhopal: 6 dicembre 1984* (2003). On Paolini's theatre, see Marchiori 2003, and Perissinotto 2005 (this latter, more specifically on Venice).

27 Excerpts from the play are available online at http://www.jolefilm.com/produzioni/teatro/parlamento-chimico/. A reference to Mario Perniola's *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* (2004, Italian edition 2000) is almost mandatory here.

28 For an accurate parallel between Marghera and Bhopal, see Casson 2007: 151–61.

29 The expression "believe in reality" alludes to Latour's *Pandora's Hope*, Chapter 1.

3

Three Earthquakes

Wounds, Signs, and Resisting Arts in Belice, Irpinia, and L'Aquila

Shimmering stars of the Bear, I never thought
That I'd be back again to see you shine …
(Leopardi 2010 [1829]: 179)

It might have been the sight of the stars, blended with the memory of Giacomo Leopardi's verses, that kept Benedetto Croce awake that summer night of 1883. Buried by rubble up to his neck, the seventeen-year-old boy observed the clear sky above him. A few meters from the point where he was trapped, his mother, father, and a younger sister were dying under the ruins of their holiday house in Casamicciola, a small village on the island of Ischia. Decades later, recollecting those dreadful moments with perceptible emotion, he wrote:

> I remained for many hours buried under the rubble, broken in many parts of my body. I regained my senses late that night, and I found myself interred up to my neck, and above my head stars were shining […]. After a while, I understood and stayed quiet, as it happens in huge calamities. I cried out for help, for me and for my father, whose voice I was hearing not far from me […]. Later in the morning, I was dug out […] by two soldiers and laid on a stretcher, in the open. (Croce 1966: 10–11)

It was July 28, a Saturday, at 9.30 p.m. It took fifteen seconds to destroy villages and towns in the Bay of Naples, and to create in the popular imagination the legendary picture of "Casamicciola" as the *natural* cataclysm par excellence. That very traumatic experience, which left so profound a trace in

Croce's body and mind, had the power to reinforce his idealistic creed and to shape the thought of Italy's last great philosopher. According to his Hegelian *Weltanschauung*, Nature is other than Mind, it is the Spirit outside itself; it has no agency, if not blind, furious, fierce, and unaware—something Leopardi again, in his "Dialogue between Nature and an Icelander" (1824), had lucidly expressed with these words:

> When I harm you in any way and with whatever means, I don't notice it, except very rarely; just as I ordinarily don't know whether I please or help you [...]. Finally, if I happened to wipe out your entire species, I wouldn't notice it. (Leopardi 1982: 195–97)

Not infrequently does the Italian landscape convey the sense of this sublime ambivalence of nature. The Casamicciola earthquake, classified as "completely destructive" on the Mercalli-Cancani-Sieberg (MCS) Scale and with an estimated magnitude of 5.79 on the Richter Scale, is indeed only one of the innumerable seismic events that, from time immemorial, have stricken the peninsula.[1] A land of tremors and volcanic eruptions, Italy is indeed a geologically unquiet country. Tectonic maps tell us that it lies in a point of the Mediterranean basin where the African and Eurasian plates merge on to each other. It was this slow and powerful submarine process of telluric encounters that, nearly forty million years ago, caused the uplift of the Alps. Aged less than a million years, the peninsula is itself a "recent" formation, whose geological youth and instability are testified by the presence of four active volcanoes—Vesuvius, Etna, Vulcano, and Stromboli. This subterranean landscape is the foundation of Italy's widely unstable geography, a quivering chart where "about 2,960 municipalities, comprising 45 per cent of the national territory and encompassing about 40 per cent of the population, lie in seismic areas" (Bevilacqua 2010: 15–16). But Italy's seismic history leads to the surfacing of another landscape, one in which catastrophes are not simply the outcome of natural calamities. The social and political response to earthquakes has, in fact, contributed to shape in this country a landscape of wounds: material wounds inflicted on the historic urban fabric as well as on important portions of the natural heritage, and moral and social wounds inflicted to the citizenship's political fabric and cultural identity. This consideration not only confirms Kate Rigby's remark that "there is no such thing as

a wholly 'natural' disaster" (Rigby 2014: 216), but it also contextualizes this remark within the intricate geo-anthropological and bio-cultural dimension typical of Italian "natural" catastrophes.[2] Here, as Marco Armiero and Marcus Hall have effectively observed, "blame for the disaster or inadequacy of emergency response can be traced to moods of deities, political decisions, and architectural features, all of which depend on place and century according to a range of cultural factors" (Armiero and Hall 2010: 6).

This comment is accurate in many respects. It suggests that the violence scripted in seismic landscapes is not only abrupt, furious, and unexpected, but it can also be gradual, profound, and *slow*. In that they often disintegrate productive systems and forces along with houses and places, seismic events and periods are "historical agents" that unfold destruction over time, pushing communities (especially agricultural ones) back in their "evolutionary" path of economic progress (Bevilacqua 2000: 75). But a major component of a quake's "slow violence" comes from the way geology "reacts" in combination with politics and society. This is clearly visible, for instance, in the "galvanization of power" (Bevilacqua 2000: 85), which takes place as central and local governments are called to rule the emergency, transforming political reality into a perennial state of exception corporeally played on the body politic. Like the kind theorized by Rob Nixon, this emerging "violence of delayed destruction" is "neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing across a range of temporal scales" (Nixon 2011: 2). All this translates here into top-down decisions over people and territories, in landscapes and ecosystems gradually sacrificed to "reconstruction," and in the formation of new political and economic elites, which are often corrupted and not rarely criminal.

Combining with social, political, and economic forces, geological events become historical; they assume a power-centered dimension, thus reinforcing hierarchies and imbalances or producing new configurations. It is so that, politically, culturally, and environmentally, a world is undone, while another one enters the scene. In such perspective, the sudden unleashing of a powerful natural cataclysm, with the human/nonhuman agencies it triggers, is part of a cycle of violence reverberating in a series of more or less small apocalypses: variously sized ends of the world operating across a range of temporal scales. These are moments in which human beings, as cultural and social beings, are

called to reconstruct their emotional and material dimension, both public and private; they are called to re-inhabit a world literally suspended on its own end, turned *against* its own *course* (this is the etymologic meaning of the Greek "*katà strophé*"). The loss that has to be faced here is not only the physical loss of a material horizon, but a loss of sense. This end of the world is the "apocalypse"—literally, a "revelation"—that, according to Croce's genial disciple, the anthropologist Ernesto De Martino (1908–65), exposes human communities to a "permanent anthropological risk"—"the risk of not being able to be-there in any possible cultural world, the risk of losing […] all horizon of mundane operability […], the catastrophe of any value-laden community design" (De Martino 2002: 219).

In the history of contemporary Italy, three seismic events, more than any others, had apocalyptic effects: the earthquake in the Belice Valley (Sicily, 1968), the one in Irpinia (Campania, 1980), and, more recently, the one that occurred in L'Aquila (Abruzzo, 2009). Whereas in Belice entire villages and towns were abandoned and relocated elsewhere, sometimes breaking any continuity with their original sites, in Irpinia the estranging and disarticulating consequences of the reconstruction have been even more destructive than the seismic shock itself. L'Aquila, finally, has experienced (and still experiences) a slow-release earthquake, one that, compared to the previous two cases, entails even more disturbing ecological and bio-political dimensions.

What is meaningful in the case of these earthquakes, however, is their repercussion on community life and narratives, and the creative ways of social self-representation they have enacted. In all three cases, the earthquake has liberated new expressive energies of resistance, disclosing "an ethical space, within which dominant discourses regarding 'nature' and 'natural disaster' might be questioned, marginalized perspectives given voice, and new modes of understanding and action enabled" (Rigby 2014: 217). With various shapes and results, writers, poets, visual artists, and filmmakers, along with citizens and other social actors, have tried to rebuild their places through a shared imagination that would give voice to those worlds apparently lost forever, filtering their silences, showing their wounds, and transforming these storied materialities into signs. Creating involuntary narrative communities, they have sought ways to retrieve a "horizon of mundane operability," re-weaving the warps of their existences and knitting them with the woof of their lands

in even stronger fabrics. As De Martino, again, has written in his posthumous study *La fine del mondo: Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali* (*The End of the World: A Contribution to the Analysis of Cultural Apocalypses*):

> Human culture in general is the solemn exorcism against this radical risk, whatever the exorcising technique; and if the cultural theme of the end of a certain existing mundane order constitutes one of the historical means [...] of redemption of this risk, [...] then the corresponding risk is always present, and culture consists in facing and preventing it. (De Martino 2002: 219)

By telling the end of the world, we try to exorcise it, to avert its threat, keeping the world's horizon open—both for human and nonhuman realities. This chapter, too, is a minor contribution to this indispensable narrative. Recounting the revelations of cultural wounds and material memories, our stories will attempt to be a minuscule exorcism of the little or big apocalypses affecting our world.

I. Irpinia, 1980

> *There are days in which the ones who die are many. These are the days of the great misfortunes. In this land, one of such days has been the 23rd of November 1980.*
>
> (Arminio 2003: 23)

As a young girl, I also lived through the frightful experience of being in an earthquake. It happened one November night, at half past seven. It was a Sunday. I was watching television. I remember the roar of the ground, as though thunder was booming up from immense subterranean caves. Above ground, it felt like wind fiercely shattering the blinds, so strong, and loud, and long. It might have been this sense of crashing rocks and air rumbling within the porous cavities of the earth to inspire Lucretius's idea that earthquakes are caused by subterranean storms and crumples. But, at that time, I did not know anything about Lucretius or geology. Living at the foothills of an active volcano, I simply thought that this would be the end of the world.

But the apocalypse, this time, was coming from further away. This place was Irpinia, a rural mountain area a hundred kilometers east of Naples. On

that unfortunate day, hit by a seismic shock of magnitude 6.5 on the Richter Scale, nearly 2,800 people were killed and 9,000 injured. Those who lost their homes and lives are hard to count, also because the reverberations of that event occurred in many forms, both social and environmental.[3] As the poet and essayist Franco Arminio—a native of eastern Irpinia—has written, "Twenty-five years after the quake / Of the dead very little will be left. / Of the living, even less" (Arminio 2011: 69). A realistic count of nonhuman losses is, as usual, impossible.

Affecting the regions of Campania and Basilicata and a territory of about 20,000 square kilometers, with 316 towns and nearly 6 million inhabitants directly involved, the earthquake of November 23, 1980 has fatally become one of the great watersheds in the history of southern Italy—a new, much larger Casamicciola. Those ninety infinite seconds changed forever the history of people, land, politics, and economy in small villages as well as in big cities, including Naples. The earthquake had indeed very long and extensive aftermaths, transforming not only the existences of those touched by it, their everyday habits and domestic geographies, but also the social landscapes of towns and cities, where public buildings—mainly schools—became a "temporary" residence for several thousands of earthquake victims, in the majority of cases low-income people. In 1991, on my first paid job, I worked for the national population census. I remember large families accommodated in classrooms, with Italy's chart and multiplication tables still hanging on the walls, now side by side with holy pictures, footballers' posters, and portraits of godparents and deceased relatives. Caged canaries and linnets, too, were often part of the quartered crowd. Cats and dogs roamed freely in the community spaces.

In my hometown, this little purgatory would last another decade, but it was just a shadow of the real hell. In a reportage significantly titled "I have seen the South die" ("Ho visto morire il sud," December 7, 1980), the writer Alberto Moravia was among the first to send a postcard from the Inferno. He wrote:

> On a mountain top […] I see a mish-mash of broken and crushed wasp nests, the grey of dissolved dust, amid which a disarray of roofing frameworks emerges. […] I look, and I try to make sense […]; and all of a sudden the truth brutally re-establishes the tie between reality and me. Those wasp nests are houses, buildings, or at least they used to be; now they are rubble, and underneath that rubble the residents are buried, as invisible as the dead in the

> cemetery I see over there, with its fence, its rows of tombstones, its cypresses. (Moravia 1980: n.p.)

If the South was dying under the rubble, however, this was not only due to the violence of a natural calamity. Denouncing both the delay in relief operations and the abuses of power of "peacetime politics," Moravia's reportage is one of the first documents to give voice to the survivors' despair: "Now we can see who stole," someone tells him. "The newly built hospital, unveiled a year ago, collapsed. The sick are dead, nurses and doctors are dead. Why is it so? Because there has been someone who cheated on concrete, just like dishonest merchants defraud on weight" (Moravia 1980). The interesting blend of biblical echoes (the dishonest merchant who uses false scales, Hosea 12:7) and corruption practices recklessly pursued against the body politic in its corporeal thickness makes this passage extremely telling of how the disaster was perceived by the victims: a mix of paleo-Christian imagery, meta-historical despair, and intense moral indignation. If this was the end of a world, the apocalypse entailed here very concrete revelations.

What was happening in Irpinia? The places devastated by the quake were largely located in territories that many Italians were now, for the first time, visualizing on a geographic map. Reaching those quasi-unknown sites, the thousands of volunteers spontaneously coming from inside and outside the country found themselves "in a mysterious part of Italy, a secretly archaic one" (Erbani 2003: 56). This age-old Italy had been substantially unchanged for centuries, maintaining the same population as in 1861, the year of the first unified national census. There, a number of gloriously ancient urban settlements, founded by Lombards and Normans and in some cases by the Romans, were scattered in sometimes-splendid isolation, surrounded by thick forests of chestnut trees.

Populated by an anthropologically compact society of "meek and tenacious people, proud of their sobriety and silence" (Erbani 2003: 61), Irpinia had been traditionally considered as a backward and poor region. Writing about the conditions of Italy's *Mezzogiorno* between the late 1940s and the early 1970s, Manlio Rossi Doria, one of the national pioneers of environmental economics and political ecology, included Irpinia in what he had called "the bone land."[4] Unlike the less peripheral, well-irrigated, and productive zones of

the "pulp land," this southern "bone" consisted of interior areas and rugged territories, historically affected by water scarcity and cultivated with often pre-modern methods (cf. Rossi Doria 2005). Over many decades, massive migration, especially toward Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, or the North of Italy, had also contributed to strip this bone of more and more flesh.

In 1980, however, Irpinia had already begun to slowly but radically shift this trend. Its main economic sources were agriculture, shepherding, and forestry, and small forms of industrial development were also starting to appear. Research conducted in 1981 by the Study Center in Agricultural Economics of the University of Naples, again under Rossi Doria's lead, bears witness to the fact that, in the decade prior to the earthquake, many important advancements had taken place in Irpinia, including noteworthy innovations in agronomic practices and the diffusion of small industry and tertiary sector (cf. CSREAM 1981). In spite of its relative poverty, the territory touched by the disaster was thus animated and vibrant. The historic centers of many towns and villages were orderly and well kept, full of activities and people, and interpreted by the residents as part of a spatial code filled with essential signs: Irpinia had indeed a profoundly rooted place-identity. This is to say that, in the early 1980s, these areas were not "on the verge of becoming extinct" (Erbani 2003: 62). Their "horizon of mundane operability," as De Martino would call it, was perfectly open. As the main shock hit, Irpinia was alive.

Franco Arminio has lyrically depicted the liveliness of the world around the earthquake's "crater" as an imperceptible "substance," the subtle agency of a discrete *genius loci*:

> There was a time when [these] places emitted a substance that the inhabitants unknowingly breathed. A sort of psychological aerosol. It was as if every place were a thermal site, and an invisible gas would filter up from beneath, helping people to stay or inviting them to leave, yet giving everyone a lymph. And so, when you talked to your fellow villagers, you had this lymph in common; and then there was the rest, from which everybody obviously drew, who knows how and where. (Arminio 2003: 35)

It was maybe a residue of this lymph that, immediately after the shock, inspired the creation of several grassroots committees and of new plans of social and territorial aggregation around the earthquake's "crater."[5] But the effect of this "psychological aerosol" lasted only a very limited time. In fact,

the dynamics unleashed by the event were multiple and ill-assorted, and soon the "crater" turned into an abyss where public resources, along with social creativities, rapidly sank.[6]

Converting tragedy into "a form of territorial government" (Vitellio 2009: 51), local and national authorities inaugurated a bond of complicity with private entrepreneurs and other economic actors. In a radical falsification of natural–cultural eloquence and the places' textuality, they maintained that the seism had struck a backward and dying community, and that no restoration on site was possible: "[s]omeone was dreaming a tabula rasa for both society and urban planning" (Erbani 2003: 62). Supported by a targeted use of disaster rhetoric, a true "catastrophe economy" could therefore rise and grow, binding together business groups and government parties in a spiral of building frenzy and unrestrained corruption. And so, after 1980, the face of this land—and, almost by contagion, the face of much of southern Italy—became finally derelict. The mind of this place, its lymph and aerosol, was suffocating under concrete and bribery.

As it clearly appears, what is at stake here is not merely the mythical imagination of the disaster, but the way natural disasters are used to establish anti-democratic mechanisms of social control and of financial speculation facilitated by political orders. This is what distinguishes between an earthquake and a catastrophe: "while an earthquake is a natural event, a catastrophe is a social/political phenomenon" (Chubb 2002: 186). The human—a *certain* human—dimension invades the scene, and dominates it entirely. What gets lost when this "invasion" takes place is the complex, more-than-human, composition of the event. This composition involves landscape, as a congealing of natural-cultural agencies, as well as nonhuman beings and more extensive eco-systemic balances, often completely fragmented and disrupted by the unsettling urbanization and overbuilding ensuing from the seismic shock.

Institutionally considered, the Irpinia earthquake typifies a system based on the "emergency," a regime of extraordinary laws depending on the conclusive authority of the commissars delegated by the central government. The same, as we shall see, will happen in a magnified manner in L'Aquila, twenty-nine years later. What really happens, however, is that this kind of regime adopts on the one hand an exceptionally permissive stance toward individual building initiatives, and on the other hand transforms the State property areas into free

zones for otherwise fraudulent urban development. According to this system's rules, public contracts are entrusted "on concession," derogating from ordinary legislation and skipping the usual systems of judiciary control.[7] Increasing the level of conflict between citizens and institutions, the consequences of this executive line were just another earthquake for the shaken communities. With the advantage of such unexpected scenery, the "emergency regime" destabilized long-consolidated social balances, creating new ties between political power and local (often criminal) economic actors.[8]

These are the elements composing the aforementioned "catastrophe economy," a term by which Ada Becchi Collidà has defined a pervasive financial system flourishing thanks to undisclosed political agreements in which ideological boundaries are often easily crossed. Co-essential to a "catastrophe economy" is therefore a "catastrophe party" (Becchi Collidà 1988), a transversal political guild that the sociologist Isaia Sales (1993) has labeled "the unified party of public spending." It was so that the long wave of reconstruction was extended not only to towns and buildings irremediably damaged, but also to places that had been hardly touched by the quake. Suffice it to say that, from the original figure of 316, the earthquake-affected municipalities became more than 600 for reasons that complied less with geology than with political patronage.

Certainly, unsavory business practices and political corruption were already notorious in the general phenomenology of Italian public life. Irpinia was not alien to the picture, as Moravia's reportage pinpoints and as Arminio also concurs: "[i]n Italy, the scenes of a tragedy work as coagulation points, precious chances for big and small fiddles, which few people can resist. And here in Irpinia, nobody resisted" (Arminio 2003: 44). But the levels of territorial disfigurement, ecological damage, and political alienation reached after November 23, 1980 were unprecedented. Coupled with infiltrating networks of corruption and organized crime systems, the emergency regime legally permitted a chronic mutilation of territories and lands, inexorably smothered by an avalanche of concrete. In some cases, agricultural and mountain territories were transformed into short-lived industrial areas; in other cases, unserviceable infrastructures were built at exorbitant costs in the middle of nowhere, just to be themselves, after a while, abandoned to their "natural" decline. As Erbani comments:

> The land is defaced. Roads and industrial sites destroy river courses and crush mountains […]. Highways are quite pointless here; they gouge into valleys and mountain ridges, marring woodland or former cultivations. They have been absurdly expensive, and when I happen to drive along them […] I hardly encounter a dozen cars. (Erbani 2003: 66–9)

Some years after the "emergency regime" had been established, these scandals became the subject of a parliamentary committee of inquiry, which exposed the illegal practices jointly pursued by politicians, entrepreneurial groups, and criminal clans. The results of that inquiry remained, nevertheless, a dead letter. More recently, the interlaced system of political corruption and criminal entrepreneurship has been acknowledged as one of the historic roots of ecomafia.

Today, even though the emergency has ceased, the landscape is still suffering from this building frenzy, and the scars are visible. The most serious thing, however, is that, along with the dream of more extensive wellbeing, the citizens' full political capacity has also drastically faded. The wounds in the landscape are the narrative of a sharp change of direction, from a decorous backwardness, bearing the incipient signs of development, to a regime suspended between destruction and patronage. A "bone land" in the midst of a painstaking resurrection, certainly Irpinia was not an idyllic place to live: it was not a "nativity scene where everyone was better and happier" (Arminio 2003: 44), but an area where poor sanitation, scarce literacy and medical care had been a serious issue for centuries. Though all the diverse scars in the post-disaster landscape, from abandoned infrastructures to legalized town-planning abuses, are the material narrative of thwarted citizenship rights, sometimes sadly perpetrated with the complicity of the citizens themselves. As Arminio has written:

> These places are not born out of history, but the ballot box. These are the districts designed by provincial councilors, […] by deputies, majors, in short, by all those mediocre executors of a makeshift democracy. Every vote is a barn turned into a house. Every election is a chance to promise asphalt and cement, so to ensure an on-site escape to those who have not fled elsewhere. (Arminio 2011: 29)

Along with the landscape, the territorial destruction has here patently affected the civil imagination of the inhabitants. "The space in which we live is

never 'neutral,'" Salvatore Settis observes in his landmark study *Paesaggio Costituzione cemento* (*Landscape Constitution Concrete*) (Settis 2012: 50). Over the course of time, societies have fashioned their spaces as necessary embodiments of their various structures and hierarchies, of their economies and production forms, systems of knowledge and religious practices. For this reason, "the space of an industrial civilization is so radically different from that of a rural one. The social space surrounds and defines the body of the single individuals, determining perceptions and representations, order of values, layers of memory" (Settis 2012: 52). These values, memories, representations are collective and singular, "outside" as well as "inside."

What is also true, however, is that the "creation" of such a space is not merely determined by the human activities happening in that space, but also always the reverse: in a constant material-discursive interplay, a space conditions and models whatever is in/together with it. As a theater and as a collective, such a space is part of a natural-cultural composition, of a system of actants, which are human and nonhuman, personal and impersonal. Most of all, however, a lived space is a semiotically organized one: "The development of modern societies and of some fundamental values (freedom, democracy, equality) has been coupled with the collective creation of a sort of '*space code*'" (Settis 2012: 52, emphasis in the original). The intrinsic consistency of this semiotic system becomes almost organismal, and, like for a single organism, we can talk about a "spatial health" as opposed to a dysfunctional space, both in ecological and socio-cultural terms. As Settis concludes:

> The destruction of the codes according to which space is organized, of their historical, memorial, and symbolic significance in favor of an indiscriminate overbuilding […] involves a dramatic loss of meanings. The social space, itself so full of purpose and sense, becomes itself a commodity; it is "worthy" […] only as long as it can be occupied, "priced," cannibalized. (Settis 2012: 54).

Attacking both pulp and bone, this cannibalization and semiotic annihilation of space is readable not only in Irpinia's landscape, but in the landscape of all those places whose "lymph" has been dissipated by the system of socially destructive practices ironically called "reconstruction."

II. Belice, 1968

> *I was born in Gibellina, aged 23. I learned mechanics in Salemi, I don't remember anything, I heard a great roar and the roof opened, I saw the sky for a moment, the stars. I've left the shovel to whoever is pleased with it, with mechanics you can expatriate. […] I've left my mother and sister in the barracks. The others remained underground. […] Like me, there are other villagers […]. We are refugees, earthquake victims, with our bags, sacks, blankets. They will help us, sure, but the offense will stay.*
>
> (Consolo 1999: 6)

Just twelve years before the Irpinia disaster, another catastrophic seism had affected the Italian South. It happened in the night between January 14 and 15, 1968 in the Belice Valley, an area in western Sicily comprised within the provinces of Trapani, Palermo, and Agrigento. With a magnitude of 5.75, the quake had devastating effects on the age-old urban fabric of this internal Sicilian valley. There, the majority of the population lived in small "agro-towns," often perched on steep hills, and hence easily exposed to landslides. In these scattered ancient villages, most houses were peasant dwellings, constructed with traditional techniques and brittle materials such as tufa and stone. This made them particularly fragile in the face of the geological forces coming from the underground, and it is not surprising that, classified on the MCS Scale, its intensity was X, "completely destructive," as in Casamicciola. That snowy, freezing night—the winter of 1968 was recorded as one of the coldest in the Mediterranean—370 people died and over 1,000 were injured.

Compared to the figure of those left homeless (over 70,000), the relatively small number of victims primarily depended on the fact that a seismic swarm had preceded the main shock. As the big tremor occurred, numerous people were spending the night outside their homes, alarmed by a sequence of modest anticipatory waves and other "signs": in some villages, for example, sulfur vapors had emanated from wells and reddish sludge had surfaced from the ground; elsewhere the warning had come from horses and mules disquietly bolting, barking dogs, or chickens and other birds oddly vibrating their wings.[9] In a peasant society used to making sense of these geo- and bio-semiotic codes, this saved many lives.

Of the fourteen towns struck by the earthquake, all located in an area that ranked among the most backwards of Italy, four were completely annihilated: Montevago, Salaparuta, Poggioreale, and Gibellina. The violence of the quake on these places was so formidable that the epicenter resembled a theater of war. Overlooking the area during the relief operations, a pilot reported that these sites seemed to have been hit by an atomic bomb. "I have flown over an inferno," he said.[10] Streets and houses had been sucked into the bowels of the earth, trees had been uprooted, and sulfur gases and fluids had come up from the cracked soil. For the people living in these peasant villages, the shock was huge: "An infinite force pulls you down, it smashes you against a wall and then against the opposite wall, and you are nothing. I think: the house has no roots anymore," said a survivor from Partanna (Barbera 2011: 26).

Poor and largely unknown, the Belice Valley was "another social political backwater of Italian life" (Alexander 2002: 166). Discovering this place for the first time, the national newspapers represented it as a pre-modern world, even more archaic than Irpinia would appear to their eyes in 1980. At that time, the local economy relied chiefly on traditional peasant agriculture, by and large dominated by the latifundium. Another source of income was a dawning (and still highly fragmented) industrial sector, which included both manufacturing and construction. The 1951 national census, however, pictured western Sicily as an area that considerable emigration flows were pushing toward an inexorable decline. After the earthquake, and encouraged by government stimulus, such gradual vanishing turned almost into a mass evacuation: "[l]ocal offices were set up to bypass normal bureaucratic procedures for issuing passports and to make available free one-way tickets for those wishing to leave Sicily; about 40,000 people left" (Chubb 2003: 188–9).[11] Nearly as violent as the seismic shock itself, emigration was an "offense" that "will stay" as a wound in the social body of this place for a long time, as lyrically argued by the Sicilian writer Vincenzo Consolo.

As in Irpinia, however, the reality behind the picture was more complex, and it would be a mistake to imagine this peasant world as one shrouded in ignorance and entirely abandoned to its gloomy fate of extinction. Indeed, the quake had affected not only surviving ancient structures, but also a slowly evolving productive system, which the common efforts of laborers and socially engaged intellectuals had been for several years laboriously trying to change. In 1957 in Partinico, the social activist, pacifist, pedagogue, and poet Danilo

Dolci had founded the "Study Center for Full Employment" (Centro studi per la piena occupazione), an organization working for the empowerment of poor farmers, and coordinating forms of active resistance to political corruption and mafia.[12] In a decade of nonviolent struggles, this combination of energies had brought pressure on the government to build infrastructure (primarily dams and roads), along with substantial policies of reforestation and environmental protection (see Dolci 1968; Barbera 2011). Less than a year before the seism, in March 1967, a huge protest march had taken place in western Sicily. Dolci's co-worker Lorenzo Barbera narrates it in his book, *I ministri dal cielo* (*The Ministers Landing from the Sky*), a key historical memoir on the Belice grassroots movement before and after the earthquake. Such was their vision in the words of a participant to the march:

> Lorenzo spoke of dams, roads, forests, schools; he spoke of social cellars, farms and cooperatives; he spoke of water in the houses and of work for everyone, and he said that emigration had to be stopped. And he spoke of figures, of the jobs that could and should be created in every town and village. (Barbera 2011: 16)

In the name of a "participatory development," Dolci, Barbera, and the Belice peasant associations had backed the timid rising of local economies, and attempted to prevent excessive emigration by way of grassroots initiatives, such as the foundation of cooperative farming and wine production. A key result of these exertions was the possibility for farmers to pay back emphyteusis lands, thus providing a tangible and durable response to the old labor-exploitative latifundium system.[13] With their towns completely razed, these people accepted the relief operations and the "temporary"' housing with a strong desire to persist along their emancipatory pathway. This was particularly important as, a few weeks after the main shock, popular committees started to appear within the tent cities, mainly with the purpose of re-establishing town councils and returning the traumatized communities to their normal activities. In those early days, the work of the committees was also crucial to ensure a more equitable distribution of subsidies and relief supplies, which had soon fallen prey to the local political elites and their patronage networks. Over the years, these popular communities gave rise to an extraordinary mass protest movement against the regional and central governments that would last until 1976, and whose traces are still alive today in Sicilian grassroots organizations.[14]

But let us return to those days of mid-January 1968. Although the country's popular reaction had been of prompt and generous solidarity, the relief effort was, like in Irpinia, untimely and disorganized. As Judith Chubb underlines, in 1968 Italy had no coordinated civil protection system for responding to natural calamities: "Responsibility for the relief effort was fragmented […], with no clear hierarchy or chain of command. As a result, in many cases, the efforts on the ground remained paralyzed while relief workers waited for orders from above" (Chubb 2002: 188; see also Alexander 2002). The homeless victims were housed in prefabricated barracks, small units (25–35 square meters) made of corrugated sheet metal. The slow pace of reconstruction—not a single house was built until 1976—makes these barracks a characteristic element of the Belice catastrophe-architecture. Intended to serve for one, maximum two, years, these shelters were used instead throughout nearly two decades. This happened in spite of their evident structural and functional limits: constantly subject to humidity and mold, the barracks were cold in the winter, hot in the summer, and provided with running water only intermittently. Eight years after the seismic disaster, in 1976, they still housed 47,000 people; as they were finally decommissioned, in 1986, 5,000 people still lived in the barracks. Even today, the disposal of the asbestos here employed as a construction material is an additional side effect of this long mismanagement.

As for Irpinia, the Belice reconstruction is an example of bad governance. The intentions at first displayed by the central government were apparently good. The claims for social growth and territorial integration coming from the grassroots movements were also heeded: accordingly, the rebirth of the Valley had to be a sort of laboratory for modern land reform and social organization, an experiment conducted under the lead of the major exponents of contemporary architecture and urban planning. But things did not go exactly this way, and this very participatory aspect was lost in the process. Instead of coupling the physical recovery of ruined towns with the formation of modern urban structures, providing investments in order to encourage social and economic development, the reconstruction consisted in a dissemination of often-uncoordinated interventions. Moreover, necessary facilities (such as the serviceable local railways destroyed by the quake) were not reinstated, whereas here, too, like in Irpinia, huge and disproportionately expensive highways were put up in the middle of nowhere, and often even left unfinished.[15] Other

issues relate, as might be imagined, to the lack of a transparent and coherent institutional framework for the reconstruction process, the proliferation of special laws (the last Belice-related act passed in 1993), corruption and excessive bureaucracy: the slogan painted on a wrecked wall in Salaparuta, "Bureaucracy kills more than the earthquake," is the perfect epitome of the situation.[16] In 1978, ten years after the seismic event, the Belice reconstruction was in fact another national case. Here, too, as in Irpinia, a parliamentary inquiry commission evinced a thick web of criminal complicities and a whole series of dysfunctions on both the political and planning levels.

But the reconstruction's key aspect is the way the destroyed towns were reshaped. In the majority of cases, historic centers, even when not irremediably damaged, were demolished or abandoned to their fate of ruins. Baroque churches and Renaissance abbeys, monumental complexes and noble residences were bulldozed. A famous example was Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's superb summer residence, Palazzo Filangieri di Cutò in Santa Margherita di Belice, a "sort of eighteenth century Pompeii," with its gorgeous garden, church and theater (Tomasi di Lampedusa 1988: 58–84). In some "hopeless" cases, the decision was made to rebuild the municipalities far from the old sites, in areas completely detached from the historic centers. Here, instead of the traditional forms and structural design, the architects and urban planners appointed by the government opted for new extensive settlements, with low houses and broad roads, generally oversized, and totally abstracted from the places' historically consolidated rationales. In the long run, this has created an identity breach in the populations, which failed to integrate in the new landscape.[17]

Suddenly, in fact, the landscape was speaking another language. To the inhabitants, the codes embedded in this space had lost their semiotic efficacy. And so, as for Maurilia—the diachronically ambivalent town in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*—the old Montevago, Poggioreale, Salaparuta, and Gibellina were radically reinvented. Here, too, the old and the new were "different cities" following one another "under the same name, born and dying without knowing one another, without communication among themselves" (Calvino 1997: 26).

In the re-founded towns, almost nothing reminded of the original structures, shaped by tufa houses or imperviously castled on steep hills. Nothing

except for their names, which instead of signaling continuity seemed to express a schizophrenic geography of disconnected identities, as in Maurilia:

> At times even the names of the inhabitants remain the same, and their voices' accent, and also the features of their faces; but the gods who live beneath names and above places have gone off without a word and outsiders have settled in their place. (Calvino 1997: 26)

This condition of fragmented presence and "territorial anxiety," as De Martino would call it, has profoundly affected the inhabitants, who "suffered a collective experience of *estrangement*, having lost the perception of belonging to a recognized and recognizable place" (Cusumano 2003: 201). What had gone off, along with "the gods who live beneath names and above places," was a storied landscape, a densely inhabited world representing "the living history of the other in us" (De Martino 2002: 528). The choral dimension of that shared cosmos had created inter-subjective bonds across generations. There, "the familiar, the domestic, [meant] exactly this: go on, you are not alone, you are not the first and only one, but you are part of an immense marching number of people, which only for an infinitely limited part is […] composed by the living" (De Martino 2002: 471). Missing the horizon of familiarity—*Heimlichkeit*—of their world, these displaced populations experienced the unfamiliar—*unheimlich*—sensation of being historically and spatially alienated, dispersed, alone.

A place of a radical urban and architectural modernization in search of a novel cultural self-representation, the New Gibellina is the symbol of the material-discursive watershed introduced by the earthquake. As Vincenzo Consolo writes, continuing his imaginary conversation with Nicola, the after-quake emigrant:

> In the nude, raw terrain, in the desolated vagueness, in the dissolved memory […], rises […] the door to the […] metaphysical city. […] Now you […] come out from a house of the new town, walk along the empty street, you look around misplaced. I meet you, I ask you. "I was born in Gibellina, aged 23" … you answer. "What do I say?… My name is Nicola […], I have worked in the quarries of Meirengen, near Basel. My wife and children are there, they don't want to come back to this village anymore. […] I would like to see the other village." And so we go along this barren countryside, with rare trees, and rocks, and stubble, and solitary palms. We arrive to the hill, to the ruins leveled and covered with an immense concrete cast, a white sheet, a lime shroud. "I

> don't know where my home was, where the castle, the square, the church …" (Consolo 1999: 129–31)

Suspended between the physical ruins of the old towns and the difficult, at times incomprehensible, narrative of the new ones, the Belice Valley has seemingly lost its gods, and a real identity bond with its pre-seismic life. And so, the offense of a radical loss will stay. But, as we shall see, the wounds of the country's body have found here other unexpected ways to be voiced.

Intermezzo. Wounds/signs: Belice, Irpinia

> *And when I say: "Show it! Show the wound that we have inflicted upon ourselves during the course of our development," it is because the only way to progress and become aware of it is to show it.*
>
> (J. Beuys, quoted in Borer 1997: 25)

Born innocent, events can turn culpable as certain human dynamics enter the scene. This is what makes earthquakes different from catastrophes. Over time, the plot of this conversion—which is nothing else but a bad combination of natural forces and political power—becomes more and more readable in the landscapes of wounds in which we, humans and nonhumans, are embedded. But, in order for these landscapes to convey renewed spatial codes, it is necessary that wounds be transformed into signs. They have to become interpretable and translatable; they have to become narratable, thus connecting the past and us *via that very event*. To reopen futures that seemed to be closed, these wounds must creatively intra-act with our imagination and with the places' life. They must be turned into art, into poetry, into stories. And so, the wound's ostension becomes the account of the inflicted violence, being at the same time a catharsis of this violence, a higher level where bounds of *familiarity* might be re-established within communities and with the land. If not a liberation, this shared attempt is a necessary act of resistance.

In spite of all the incongruous practices of "reconstruction," Gibellina is one of these acts. It is so, because the apparent fracture with the past is not (or at least not only) the outcome of uncoordinated land planning and uncontrolled building speculation, as occurred elsewhere in Belice, but the result of a project and of

a cultural vision. With its dramatic and quasi-paradoxical radicalism, Gibellina embodies a double narrative, one entailing both memory and project. This materializes in a town that, settled in a new space and imbued with a completely different urban syntax, has used contemporary art to shape a new identity and to creatively reinforce its link to the past. The case of Gibellina is unique. With an unparalleled mobilization of Italian and international intellectuals, artists, writers, and musicians—from Leonardo Sciascia and Renato Guttuso to Joseph Beuys and John Cage—the mayor Ludovico Corrao organized, at the end of the 1970s, Gibellina's transfiguration into a museum-city for postmodern art and "one of the greatest workshops of architecture of the post-war period" (Oddo 2003: 168). Following this vision, Gibellina's art had not only to be available in a civic museum (opened in 1980), housing a permanent collection of more than 1,800 works in paintings, graphics, and sculptures (see Pes and Bonifacio 2003), but artworks had to be disseminated across the entire town and its surroundings. Here, again, paintings, sculptures, and architectural monuments, such as Francesco Venezia's *Garden*, the *Chemist's House* and the *Squares System* by Franco Purini and Laura Hermes, *Belice's Door* by Pietro Consagra, Arnaldo Pomodoro's *Plough*. And so, the reconstruction became an effort to convert a dying community into the subject of an avant-garde experiment, whose symbol should have been Joseph Beuys's planned *Sacred Wood*, an oak thicket that had to be planted on the area of the former barrack-town and destined to grow and increase over time, like his coeval *7000 Oaks* project in Kassel.

Debated and debatable in many respects, Gibellina's "model" has never been exempt from criticism.[18] Accusations mostly address the abstractness of the new architectural and urban structures: suspended between the material ruins of the old town and the difficult narrative of the novel one, the New Gibellina often conveys a feeling of "territorial anxiety." Objectively, some creations and urban structures (for example, the above-mentioned *Squares System* or Quaroni's *Chiesa Madre*) seem to overindulge in the "experimental" side of the project, often leading to a prevalence of cement over green spaces, and most of all appearing dramatically in conflict with this ancient community's traditional self-representations and small-scale lifestyles. This was the picture behind Vincenzo Consolo's polemical portrait of the "metaphysical city," oozing "broad roads, ramps, stairways, terraces, porticos, loggias, deserted amphitheaters, […] cubes, spheres, cones, cylinders, stone

gardens, iron squiggles, marble doors […], arcane alphabets" (Consolo 1999: 129). Considering Consolo's active contribution to the resurrection of the town gives, however, a measure of the prevalent ambivalence toward the New Gibellina. In fact, apart from legitimate censures and problematic re-inhabitation, the project behind this coveted "cultural rebirth" (Oddo 2003: 174) was ambitious and amazing in many ways: by crafting a physical site for "Civil Art from which the entire country could benefit" (Isgrò 1993: 12), Ludovico Corrao—more or less felicitously in practice—was envisioning for Gibellina both an apocalypse and an "anthropological exorcism."

But Gibellina's real masterpiece—the reason why this town will always be there as a crystallized picture of the way nature and culture can be cyclically stratified—is Alberto Burri's *Cretto*. Created between 1985 and 1989 by completely leveling out and then covering the remains of the deserted medieval village with an evocative cast of white concrete, the *Cretto* perfectly preserves the original road layout of Gibellina's plan. The *Cretto* (a "cracked surface"—one of Burri's favorite motifs) is "the first earthquake monument in the Mediterranean," a quasi-spectral artwork that "provocatively jolts our conscience into perceiving an almost tangible earthquake, carved into that landscape" (Guidoboni 2010: 52). Following Corrao's invitation to pay homage to the extinct town, Burri (1915–95)—an artist whose whole aesthetics entails an interpretation, both conceptual and physical, of materiality—captured with its cast Gibellina's lost voice, turning its silence into a solid white cry, incorporated as an image and as a sign in the enduring life of the western-Sicilian ecosystem. "The *Cretto* is beautiful," writes Carola Susani:

> In silence, abandoned on a hill that changes its colors with the seasons, it talks of the human condition, of violence—the one we carry out and the one that overwhelms us; it talks about time and about how it stops all of a sudden, it is like a sort of wholly glorious impetus. (Susani 2008: 25)

In this "glorious impetus," the *Cretto* is not simply beautiful, but sublime. It is, as Jeffrey Cohen would say, "inhuman": completely alien, and yet elementally intimate to us.[19]

The transfiguration of the old Gibellina into one of the world's largest works of land art, frozen in time, visible from space, is a material-semiotic translation of this event into a universal experience. The event here is not to be intended as the seism, but as the infinite, irredeemable loss implied by (and



Untitled (2007). Gibellina. Il *Grande Cretto* di Burri. Courtesy of Mario Macaluso.

subsequent to) it. In its storied corporeality, Gibellina is now the semiotic embodiment of loss *per se*, a house forever mirroring its emptiness in the surrounding world.

As for the new town, numerous and diverse have been the polemics about this gigantic concrete memorial, left unfinished by his author and now finally nearing completion. Many critical voices have lamented the literal erasure of the old Gibellina from the physical map of the Belice Valley. What cannot be left unspoken, however, is that Gibellina's ruins were damaged beyond repair. This non-recoverability was Alberto Burri's source of inspiration, as he first visited the site. But the undeniable outcome of this artistic metamorphosis is that Gibellina is now not merely a crucial locus of Belice's emotional geography, but a symbol. Now, it is not just an irreplaceable element in the material memory of the Belice Valley, but a figure of the post-traumatic narrative of our natural-cultural collective. Besides its material presence, therefore, Gibellina now has new immaterial, metaphorical meanings. Transcending the mere physicality of concrete cast and devastated land, it is no longer a mere *thing*, but a relation between a physical event and its idea: its significance finally

"erases the materialist/idealist opposition" (Wheeler 2014: 404). It is hardly imaginable that a restoration work could have given to this site the symbolic power and arresting expressiveness it now possesses.

And the *Cretto* is alive. With performances of theater, music, poetry, and art, the "Oresteia" Festival that takes place almost every year in this very "earthquake monument" testifies to a will to keep the narrative flow open in multiple directions.[20] As the playwright and visual artist Emilio Isgrò has insightfully noted, "[p]robably, without theater, the people of Gibellina would have never been able to see themselves amid the rubble, and perhaps they would have never acted" (Isgrò 1993: 13). Only via its own representation has it become possible to turn tragedy "into a real force." This, concludes Isgrò, "was clearly the result of a need, and not of […] purely aesthetical experimentalism, unable to become a political act" (Isgrò 1993: 13).

Performed here, these theatrical activities entail a bond of continuity not simply with the past, but with the dead, with the "former" world. In this respect, the artistic events resemble the ancient rites officiated at the ancestors' burial sites. Transfigured as an artwork and a proscenium for representing itself, Gibellina has possibly become abode for "the gods who live beneath names and above places," and who had apparently "gone off" the reconstructed town. It is therefore even more scandalous for this site to be periodically exposed to the risk of being abandoned to its elemental decline as a result of chronic lack of governmental funds and, one must add, a sort of inexorable indifference shown by the authorities called to preserve and valorize such important parts of our historical heritage. In this, Gibellina's *Cretto* is sharing the sad and unbelievable fate of many world-famous Italian monumental sites, including Pompeii.

Similarly, even though not as powerfully in terms of extension and impact on the landscape, contemporary art has also contributed to the process of "semiotization" of the wounds left by the Irpinia's earthquake. I refer here to an extraordinary art collection titled *Terrae Motus*, since 1992 permanently located in the Royal Palace of Caserta. One of the "most original and revolutionary collections of the 20th century" (Guccione 2001: 13), *Terrae Motus* consists of seventy-one works by sixty-seven of the greatest contemporary artists, some of whom were also actively involved in the Gibellina project. Their names include Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, Anselm Kiefer,

Luciano Fabro, Tony Cragg, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Keith Haring, Enzo Cucchi, Robert Rauschenberg, Jannis Kounellis, Bertrand Lavier, Robert Mapplethorpe, Julião Sarmento, Mario Schifano, Otto Muehl, Cy Twombly, and Emilio Vedova. Elaborating on the intra-action between art and the every-day life of the seismic aftermaths, *Terrae Motus* put together artists from different generations, experiences and aesthetic languages, proposing "an idea of art as being at once the expression of individual poetics and collective participation" (Guccione 2001: 13). Invited by Lucio Amelio (1931–94), an *engagé* intellectual and patron of an avant-garde art gallery in Naples, the exhibit was the result of a previously open conversation between artists, transformed by the earthquake in a creative polyphony. As Amelio recollected in the documentary *Lucio Amelio/Terrae Motus*, shot in 1993 by Mario Martone, "the process leading to *Terrae Motus* had already started many years earlier in my gallery […]. As the quake hit with its brutal force, our commitment became more intense. It was as if the fissure between art and society […] had become dramatically visible" (quoted in Guccione 2001: 13).

Connecting artistic imagination with telluric violence, the concept behind the Amelio collection was similar to the one animating Gibellina's open-air museum, namely, that of proving the potentialities of contemporary art as a constructive tool for a building civil narratives of resistance. As Angela Tecce has suggested, "in the stubborn will to physically bring the artists, and not simply their creations, to Naples" Amelio wanted to break "the sense of 'colonization'" implied in the importing of already made artworks (Tecce 2001: 28). Art (and artists) had to be present on the spot, flowing from the same cracked soil, the same existential ruin. And so, interfering with the disrupted land, these creative presences were performing a ritual of mutual belonging between the narratives conveyed by art and those expressed by the earth.

Dedicated to imagining the Irpinia quake, the *Terrae Motus* artworks are *apocalyptical oeuvres*. In a meta-historical sense, in fact, they *reveal* the intimate and universal aspects and voices conjured up by the earthquake. Joseph Beuys was one of the first to respond to Amelio's call. The opening work of the exhibit, his *Terremoto in Palazzo* (*Earthquake in Palace*) is an assemblage of domestic tools and objects, which become the estranged setting for a famous performance: nestled under a table, the artist unrolled a long paper ribbon, mimicking the seismographic tape of the main shock.

Here, in typical Beuys style, not only does the artist become himself an instrument (in our case, a seismographer) apt to record the perturbed life of things, but these very common objects are "lifted up" (*aufgehoben*) to an unsuspected universality, while at the same time retaining the meaning of their irreducible singularity: that of being fragile, exposed, open to the world. Also extremely telling, Andy Warhol's *Fate presto* (*Hurry Up*) is a series of three huge serigraphic pictures (270 × 200 centimeters) reproducing the first page of Naples's newspaper *Il Mattino* as it came out on November 26, 1980. Magnified, multiplied, and repeated in metallic black-and-white variations, the Italian President Sandro Pertini's call for rescue operations is here frozen into a severe echo, loaded with a tragic force which is certainly uncommon to pop-art oeuvres. Finally, Luciano Fabro's *Italia Porta* (*Italy Door*) is an upside-down Italy (one of this artist's tropes), which *opens* and *leads* to a reversed mirror-reality. Like Burri's *Cretto*, which can well be taken as the larger body of the nation solidified into a stone shroud, Fabro's double overturned Italy is the sign that this country has lost connection with its cliché-imagery of "beautiful land." The national mind and body have here split and metamorphosed into two uncanny alter egos.

I have chosen these three examples to accentuate the intellectual climate underlying the *Terrae Motus* collection and the cross-national appropriation of this desperately local wound. International artists came to Naples in order to enable the affected territory to perform its apocalypse, namely, to show that wound, to articulate it as a sign. To attain the same goal, Franco Arminio, whom we have already encountered elsewhere in these pages, adopts a complementary strategy. Eastern Irpinia, and his town Bisaccia in particular, become the emanating fulcrum for a philosophy of places, which he calls "*paesologia*" (coarsely translatable as "placeology"). Through a narrative and poetic obsession with marginal towns and villages, all bordering some catastrophe's "crater," Arminio aims at creating an ethical and poetic imagination of both quake and places, an emotionally "moved geography" (Arminio 2013) that connects on one map all the "bone lands" of Italy. But the kind of catastrophe to which he draws attention is not only the huge catastrophic event. It is, rather, the eventfulness of little things, of stonewalls and shovels, of emptied squares and of people who are literally "*spaesati*," *dis-placed* and *place-less*. This implies porosity between landscape and style. Like the towns

and things he encounters, his writing is in fact "a crumbled writing," and the writer himself is in a constant tension of becoming one with what is around him—of becoming rubble, a feral animal, an elemental presence. Constantly piercing the boundaries between outside and inside, the landscape is here a densely physical creative space, where "earth and flesh are almost mingled, and the body becomes landscape, and the landscape is embodied" (Arminio 2011: 11).

To be rigorous, the Anglicized term "placeology" does not completely render the sense of this "discipline" "midway between ethnology and poetry," as Arminio defines it (Arminio 2011: 10). *Paese* in Italian means "country," "land," but it can also mean "village," "small town." It is somehow equivalent to the French *pays*, and it condenses both the idea of a larger national entity and of smaller realities, dislocated from the center. It might carry—and it usually does—an emotional connotation, a sense of belonging, but also one of enclosure, of insularity. All these meanings are present in Arminio's *paesologia*, something in which the phenomenology of peripheral realities and of their uncertain natural-cultural borders might parallel the sense of resilient hybrid presences characterizing Gilles Clément's "third landscape" or Antoine Picon's "anxious landscapes."[21] Lost and dispersed amid a voracious history, Arminio's resilient landscape is populated by stones and empty squares, by weeds and rusty tools, by abandoned things glinting with unexpected narrative power. But, more than merely mapping such landscape, *paesologia* is a way to keep one's eye and hands and feet and mind rooted on site. It is a way to preserve the material horizon of domestic intimacy, averting these roots from a fatal *déracinement*. And so, in an implicit dialogue with Ernesto De Martino, Arminio understands that the end of places and landscapes is the materializing of the "permanent anthropological risk" of not being-there "in any possible cultural world" (De Martino 2002: 219). The fading of this signifying horizon is the apocalypse. Therefore, *paesologia* is a medium intended to create an imagination, a language, and a system of signs for the wounds left in the landscape by both the earthquake and "the course of our development," as Beuys says.

This attitude does not involve an idealization of ruins, but it is rather a way to feel the pulse to the hidden places, to keep them by the hand, creating a mutual bond of stories, affection, and trust. "Placeology," Arminio writes, "is

a form of intimate resistance" (Arminio 2011: 11). But, however intimate, this resistance is active and political: "There is discomfort, there is loneliness, but there is beauty, too. From here we have to start, from making good use of our ruins" (Arminio 2011: 80).

Using Irpinia as leverage to disclose wider horizons, Arminio shows how the loss of landscape and land produces a circulation of ideas and feelings of identity and identification, creating bonds of poetic solidarity across catastrophes. He will also be present in L'Aquila to witness the seismic aftermaths. The syllogism is simple: the tie connecting people and places was, in Irpinia and elsewhere, a vital one. If these places are turned into non-places, then these people become non-people, paradoxical organisms without a bio-cultural memory of their environment. A "placeological" poetry is nothing more than the attempt to reconstruct all these loosened ties.

Faced with the vanishing of places, important discourses such as that about the Anthropocene seem therefore at once necessary and desperately abstract. The entanglement of agencies revealed by such calamities refers in fact not only to the way humans, generally considered, modify the earth's bio-geochemical cycles, but also to the way, in some regions of the planet, some humans are themselves trapped in these cycles *and* in the cycles of political discourses, social discrimination, thus failing to preserve their citizenship rights and their cultural identity. Poetry and art are the voices left to speak about (and from) this apparent desert. Here, another important message of resistance is that of a creative utopia, one which contemporary art and a minimalistic poetry of places have interpreted without awe, and maybe with the very sense of their own fragility. And so, maybe the only possible creative response to these cataclysms is an art and a poetry of limit, an art and poetry that are themselves both fragment and universe, and that do not fear to house lizards and spontaneous vegetation, being instead able to show their own cracks, their own wounds.

In his book *The Fragility of Things*, the political philosopher William Connolly has observed that the vision we have to develop when confronted with disasters—whether earthquakes, tsunamis, and other events in which the combination of human and nonhuman elements is inextricable—is not that of a superior ontological necessity, but rather that of an unremitting reaction, an ethical-cultural militancy in favor of the acknowledgment of such fragility (Connolly

2013). The world of places and people is fragile, but it is also desperately resilient. Making good use of our ruins is a revolutionary act of resistance. At least, until something or someone comes and claims their rights on these ruins.

III. L'Aquila, 2009

> *The Dome Square is the one that we saw so many times on television, at the time of the media occupation of the city by Berlusconi and his troops: a sort of Normandy landing ordered to convince Italians that they are governed by a good and omnipotent man. […] The political use of ruins was at its height.*
> (Arminio 2013: 14)

In a bizarre coincidence, all the earthquakes in our narrative happened at night. It was at night, April 6, 2009, at 3.32 a.m., when the ancient city of L'Aquila, founded in the thirteenth century on a territory populated since the pre-Roman era, fell under a seismic shock of magnitude 5.8 on the Richter Scale. The quake, which extended to a large portion of the Abruzzo region, caused 309 human casualties and injured over 1,500 people. The homeless were some 65,000.[22]

L'Aquila's story has several points in common with that of the previous earthquakes. Besides the structural antiquity or poor construction quality of the destroyed buildings, all three events display the "repeating pattern" in Italy's seismic history, namely, that "each strong quake is followed by a long, drawn-out, and irresponsible aftermath" (Guidoboni 2010: 51). The huge dissipation of public resources, short-circuiting in the chain of responsibilities, corruption and delays in the reconstruction process, and an ensuing fragmentation in the socio-territorial fabric are constant elements in this pattern. Another important element has to be kept in mind, namely, that all three earthquakes hit the South. Although geographically in Central Italy, Abruzzo, in fact, has always been historically considered a southern region, being until 1861 part of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

There are also profound dissimilarities, though, between our cases in point. Unlike Belice and Irpinia, L'Aquila was not an obscure corner in a residual pre-historic Italy. Quite the opposite: it was one of the country's

jewels, oozing with artworks and splendid architecture, and bordering the sublime ecological beauties of the Gran Sasso National Park. A university town, L'Aquila was a pulsating center for arts, economy, and culture, housing more than 77,000 residents, 27,000 of whom were national and international students (Mastropaolo 2010: 9–10). Another difference is that the calamity did not take the population completely by surprise. That earthquakes are unpredictable is certainly a cornerstone of seismology (see e.g. Hough 2009). But it is also true that seismic swarms, especially in seismic zones, are likely to culminate in big tremors, and in L'Aquila an intense and worrying seismic swarm, begun in December 2008, had preceded the main shock. The comparison with Belice, where almost everything uncommon, from barking dogs to gas clouds, became an alarming sign, is tragically ironic. In L'Aquila, forty-one years later, the seismographers' alarms were not given much importance. Deliberately ignoring these alarms and the region's geological history and features, the Seismic Risk Committee and the Civil Protection Department, all controlled by the government, decided indeed to "cure" the population's anxiety with periodical "tranquillizing" communications. A prudential attitude, instead of a systematic downplaying of the risk, could have saved many lives, as the magistrates also pinned down in 2012 with an unprecedented sentence.[23]

But the very gist of L'Aquila's story, the one where the apparent analogies yawn in a gulf of difference, is in the way the quake was used to transform the city into a postmodern laboratory for pushing the "hybridization of democracy and authoritarianism" (Mastropaolo 2010: 26) further than ever before. Patrolled by military forces and seized by TV shows, the earthquake-hit communities experienced new bio-political forms of social control. In a city transformed by the media into an "exercise room to display the efficiency of the Government" (Arminio 2011: 309), we are finally confronted with "the political use of ruins at its height," as Franco Arminio noted after having repeatedly visited L'Aquila (Arminio 2013: 14). This is also connected to another important difference: by means of art, of poetry, or of disputable land planning and construction works, Belice and Irpinia "arose" from their rubbles. L'Aquila, in turn, remains desperately frozen in that night of 2009, its historic palaces and magnificent churches, its very breathing urban fabric missing every day a chance to return to life.

It is not easy to tell the story of L'Aquila's quake. The combination of politics, social agony, and the city's persistent ruin, and most of all the fact that its aftermaths continue to this day, do not favor lucid accounts. Many books, documentaries, and reportages, however, have attempted to tell the wreck of the city, and all of them disclose aspects of this complex and painful story. They talk about Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's dictatorial management of the emergency and of the absolute power exercised by the government in conjunction with the Civil Protection Department, its operative *longa manus*. They talk of the "largest evacuation in postwar Italian history," with "33,000 people gathered in more than one hundred camps, and the remaining part of the population (nearly 30,000) dislocated in hotels on the coast" (Sirolli 2012: 62). They talk of the way citizens were, for interminable months, practically held hostage in the tent cities, forced to obey a surreal curfew, controlled in every move, and prevented from speaking with reporters or with simple "outsiders." They talk of soldiers, with weapons and riot gear, patrolling the entrance of camps and overseeing lunch distribution. They talk about the practice of turning the seism into a show, culminating in the impromptu decision to move the 2009 G8 summit from a luxury location in Sardinia to L'Aquila's smashed historic center, with an incredible waste of public money. They talk of "the Berlusconi model" and of his ghostly "New Towns," a "centrifugal delirium" made of "a caged heart and many scattered limbs" (Arminio 2011: 16), increasing logistical problems, traffic congestion, and personal isolation. They talk of his C.A.S.E.—a captivating acronym for "eco-friendly, anti-seismic compounds," with the double meaning of "homes," "*case*" in Italian—a joint occupation of a public soil and a private semantic field, here used to designate nineteen pre-fabricated residential agglomerations for 15,000 people, cut off from any urban contexts and services, served with a bottle of "Italian spumante" in the fridge and postcard bearing greetings from the Prime Minister on the table. They talk of these "houses" built on agricultural ground, and even in some strictly protected zones of the Gran Sasso National Park—"houses" presented as a benevolent concession from a sovereign power and materializing overnight as the ultimate offense to a land, a landscape, and a citizenry now definitively relegated to a second-rank role in the country's political life. They talk of the "economic shock therapy" à la Naomi Klein, inflicted on citizens

"forced [...] into a passive role with no control over their lives," "'expelled' from society," infantilized, delegitimized (Hajek 2013: 630). They talk of the political powers' disdained reactions in front of the citizens' requests for more participative decision-making processes, and of the population's disconcerted pain as police investigations revealed the scandals underlying the whole (mis)management of the catastrophe. They talk about individuals whose existence has been completely torn apart not by the seismic event per se, but by the top-down programmed community displacement—"*spaesamento*," De Martino would name it—a missed social inclusion, culminating in uprooting, abandonment, and loss. They talk about the fact that here, after the quake, the consumption of psycho-pharmaceutical drugs as well as the selling of PlayStations has increased to unmatched levels.

They talk about all these things and many, many more. But the major narrative about L'Aquila's earthquake is told by its rubble abandoned in the streets, the collapsing palaces suffocated by disproportionate, outrageously costly, and rapidly rusty scaffoldings. Because today, October 14, 2014, all this ruin is still there. And so, there is nothing to add. *This* is L'Aquila's wound. And this wound is open, still waiting to become a sign.

In this narrative suspension, and not merely in the overwhelming biopolitical aspects, lies the real difference between L'Aquila's story and that of the previous two quakes.[24] In Irpinia and Belice—although painful, slow, and fragmented—a creative-evolutionary shift from wounds to signs took place; in L'Aquila, in turn, this very shift is still missing. Certainly, L'Aquila's voice is alive in earthquake victims' movements and community protests, in blogs, videos, in the vibrating denunciations of TV shows (for example, Roberto Saviano's *Vieni via con me*), in environmentalist essays, manifestos, calls for public responsibility issued by scholars and public intellectuals, in urban narratives.[25] It has also been the subject of Sabina Guzzanti's impressive political documentary *Draquila: L'Italia che trema* (*Draquila: Italy Trembles*, 2010), in which tragedy and satire, as it often occurs in the works of this *engagée* artist, are coupled in order to dismantle the lethal metanarrative of magnanimity and power behind Berlusconi's C.A.S.E. and the rhetoric about the government's compassionate and proficient intervention. Backed by the media, these rhetorical forms and metanarratives covered indeed undisputable states of things, facts solidly proved by the post-quake life conditions of L'Aquila people

as well as by justice investigations and sociological studies: for example, that abandoning the historic city was a deliberate choice meant to favor new (and less democratic) building developments, or that the life in the tent cities was a form of psycho-physical coercion, and that the population was indeed being subjected to a "soft form of institutionalization" (Sirolli 2012). With more effective words, this is something that in *Draquila* a professor at L'Aquila University labels "dictatorship of shit"—a regime that does not materially kill or torture citizens, but strongly diminishes their capacity to dissent.

Works like Guzzanti's film are important, and they have played indeed a crucial socio-therapeutic function on the population. After years of persisting inertia, however, this function has been superseded by a deeper sense of frustration. In L'Aquila, new ruins are visible alongside those created by the earthquake. These ruins do not strike only the historic center, but also the New Towns and the C.A.S.E., which, after absorbing a huge part of the public money earmarked for the seismic "emergency," started to deteriorate soon after their fabrication.

But, if satire is a soothing cure, I would like to conclude this narrative with another semiotic attempt, in which I see both a symbol and an ethical claim. The director of photography of Guzzanti's film was Mario Amura. Born in 1973, Amura was raised at the foothills of an active volcano, which he photographs every New Year's Day and which is the same one whose awakening I dreaded that night of November 1980. He reached L'Aquila the day after the first tremor. With his camera, he was there to see and to document, as he had done many times before, in Naples as well as in Bosnia, in India as well as in rural China or Latin America. Mario has a secret. Whenever he takes his pictures, he becomes invisible. He is able to shoot hundreds of photos and remain completely unnoticed, like a placard on a wall or a lamppost at a street corner. I have never understood how he can do so, but maybe this is the key of art-making—being at once invisible and yet unquestionably there, compressing your own presence and voice in order to allow a magnified expression of the world around you. Something like this, the Jewish mystic Isaac Luria saw in the sixteenth century, happens to God at the moment of creation.

In L'Aquila, however, the photographer's self-hiding was really hard, and for a simple reason: the access to the disaster scene was strictly prohibited

to unauthorized people. Therefore, in order to secretly continue his visual narrative, Amura had to wear the uniform of the volunteers and help the relief operations. He took his pictures while building tents and electrical systems, staying himself in makeshift quarters and sleeping in his car. The photos of those early few days number hundreds, and it has been hard to select the images you see in these pages. But the three you have in front of you seemed to be particularly telling about the wounds and beings exposed by this local apocalypse. More precisely, they tell us that this is a radial apocalypse, one which encapsulates in one shot humans, nonhumans, and things.

In the first picture, the sheet suspended from the balcony tells us of a sleep suddenly turned into a surreal awakening, and of how subtle is the border that separates a dream from a trauma, safety from defenselessness, a presence from an absence, a bedroom from a desert. But this sheet is also a sign of demise, and of a reality that surrenders: knotted there, on that wrecked balcony, it is a white flag. The second picture is that of a dog near a fallen cross, at a church's entrance. Turning her back to the cross, the distressed animal is an unintentional *agnus dei* looking for food, family, or a shelter. Forcing us to diffract the events into a creaturely prism, this dog condenses the more-than-human dimension of the catastrophe, echoing Simone Weil's call to compassion: "[c]ompassion for every creature, because it is far from the Good. Infinitely far. Abandoned. God abandons our entire being—flesh, blood, sensibility, intelligence, love—to the pitiless necessity of matter" (Weil 1998: 142).

But in the last picture the epiphany is complete. From the shapeless remains of what used to be the students' house, a university dormitory almost entirely destroyed by the quake, firemen—they themselves an essential part of this weird assemblage of humans and ruins—dig up a personal ID, a picture in the picture. And so, here, too, art triggers turbulence. The photographer's eyes become instrumental for the hidden wounds to become visible. It is via these eyes that what was or had been buried now has a face and returns our gaze.



Untitled. L'Aquila, 2009. Courtesy of Mario Amura.



Untitled. L'Aquila, 2009. Courtesy of Mario Amura.



Untitled. L'Aquila, 2009. Courtesy of Mario Amura.

An ending

> *The central point, however, remains this one, namely, to live up to the challenge, to re-model ever again, via the value-generating work, the domesticity of the world.*
>
> (De Martino 2002: 479)

How does one recover from all these losses? Many of them are irredeemable. In the majority of cases, it is materially impossible to restore broken balances, to bring back to life ancient places that do not exist anymore, or to undo the damages that wreaked havoc in the landscapes, social ecologies, biomes, and single existences affected by the quake. We live, in many senses, in the constant condition of being victims. We—a larger "we," referring to the people who lost their homes and status, to the citizens who lost important pieces of their natural-cultural heritage, to the living beings that lost their habitats—are all victims of these earthquakes, no matter whether we are from Irpinia, Sicily, L'Aquila, San Francisco, Turkey, or Lisbon. *We*, *landscape*, carry the wounds of these shocking events and of their aftermaths on our body politic, and will do so indefinitely.

For this very reason, we ought to build a cognitive repository for these wounds, and retain the geo-semiotic memory of these events. To do so, we ought to learn to read these wounds in the landscape, since it is there that we can first see signs of violence, and try to better recognize the layers of such violence. Even if this violence started underground, its signs emerge in urban sprawl and anti-social architectures, as well as in other concrete forms hurting our collective. *As landscape*, we carry these wounds on our own body.

Whether human or not, every thing is body, and, whether personal or impersonal, every thing is political. Earthquake narratives teach us that this intermingling of personal and impersonal is what is really at stake in our ecological world of natures, landscapes, and environments. The way artistic or poetic creativity can respond to this mixture of agencies is exemplary. In Irpinia, Arminio looks for the traces of disappearing places. His invented discipline, *paesologia*, in its mingling of earth and flesh as bio-semiotic and narrative agencies, is a real blend of personal and impersonal voices, a *Spoon River* of places and things. The artists of the *Terrae Motus* exhibit, on the other hand, counter the catastrophe by introducing new turbulences in our natural-cultural collective. Participating in the creativity of worldly dynamics, they enter the cracking surface of things, and insert in the disorder of nature and society "a further act of disorder, this time organized according to the formal laws that rule [the art's] particular order" (Bonito Oliva 2001: 227). In this way, art, like an unexpected "You," "forces the world to return its gaze" (Bonito Oliva 2001: 227–8).

The semiotic addition of these artworks to the geo-social memory of the quake creates new unpredicted emergences. This is even more perceptible in the landscape of Gibellina. Gibellina, both the old village and the new town, is the sign of a fracture and of turbulence. In their being so "allergenic" and so hard to metabolize for the body of this territory, the contemporary artworks disseminated in the new landscape are meant to become themselves fractures and turbulence in a reality that carries in its bodies the signs of hurt and disruption. The reality of Gibellina—another *figure* of the "eternal Casamicciola" that is engrained in all of Italy's catastrophe narratives—is a broken, interrupted reality. The imposed, ghostly, petrified, and almost post-geological silence of Burri's *Cretto* is a restitution of semiotic capacity to *us* landscape. The *Cretto* is a material narrative in which the personal and the impersonal finally melt,

becoming part of our ecology of mind. In the fissured lunar surface of this vast artwork, the land is dramatically free to show its wounds. These wounds, however, are not intended as *singular* wounds, wounds whose echo is now lost in the distance of time, but they stand here as universal categories. Via its mere presence, the *Cretto* shows that the land—every land—has wounds. Burri's work becomes therefore a fusion of singular and plural, personal and impersonal; a meld of mercy and indifference, a new non-modern sublime and an a-temporal setting where one can imagine Leopardi's Nature resting in her in coolness side by side with the "immense marching number" of all past lives. A truly apocalyptic artwork, Burri's *Cretto* is the embodied category of geo-social wounds, of all the wounds of our Anthropocene collective.

This move from wound to sign has not occurred in L'Aquila. With its culpable abandonment and its ruins, L'Aquila is slowly becoming another figure in the universal inventory of underground voices. Waiting for the liberation of these voices buried underneath rubble and political recklessness, however, Mario Amura's photography pursues ways to build a provisional bridge of meaning. Using the quake to cross the boundaries separating living beings and things, houses and waste, places and pieces, the irredeemable dismay of a dog and that of a fireman, Amura provides us with a temporary semiotic catalogue of the encounters between the personal and the impersonal. In the ethical narrative arising under our eyes, the personal becomes impersonal and vice versa; they are both characters in the story.

And so, the picture of the ID dug out of the rubble adds one last, revealing tile to the apocalypse. On this shredded piece of paper held by the firemen's hands, we see a face, and all at once we see the personal and the impersonal converge. All of a sudden, this human face becomes a sign of what has been defaced. Like the city and the entire reality around it, this face claims to be called by name, it claims to be semiotically saved, to be embodied in the im/material narrative of memory. When this face emerges from the rubble, L'Aquila's wound is wide open. L'Aquila is its own wound, and this face is its epiphany.

Emmanuel Levinas has suggested that the other's face—"*le visage d'autrui*"—carries an unremitting appellation: an appellation to quit violence, to quit absolutisms, to quit any self-centered master narrative. Always and again, the other's face is addressing us. Manifested in that student's face, L'Aquila is still waiting to be recognized. But looking this face squarely in the eyes is the first

step to liberate the voices and the hurt hidden under the rubble of all “natural” catastrophes. Nature, if it exists, might be indifferent or cruel, like Leopardi’s gigantic seated lady in a deserted Iceland, or like the idealists’ fierce antithesis of Mind. But natureculture—the world, of which we are and in which we dwell—has instead to be minding and compassionate. It has to dig us—all of us—out of the rubble, and let us show our wounds. It has to bring us out there in the open, point out the stars, call us by name.

Notes

1 Unlike the Richter scale, which determines *magnitude* from the logarithm of the amplitude of waves recorded by seismographs, the Mercalli-Cancani-Sieberg (MCS) Scale is used in Italy to measure the *intensity* of a seism based on its effects on the built environment. In the United States, the Modified Mercalli Intensity Scale is used as an adaptation of the MCS Scale (see https://scits.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/277.full_.pdf [accessed June 17, 2015]). My source about the estimated magnitude and intensity of the earthquakes I discuss in this chapter is Rovida et al. 2011 (also available at http://emidius.mi.ingv.it/CPTI11/ [accessed June 17, 2015]). All the seismological data provided here have been revised by Dr. Nicola Alessandro Pino of the Istituto Nazionale di Geofisica e Vulcanologia. I am grateful to him for his friendly help and meticulous reading.

2 On this, see also Rigby 2015. Very interesting discussions on the sociological aspects of these emergences are collected in Saitta 2015.

3 The official figures of earthquake victims were 2,735 dead, 8,848 injured, and 280,000 homeless, 50,000 of which in the city of Naples. See Chubb 2002: 214.

4 On Rossi Doria (1905–88), see Bevilacqua 1990; Misiani 2010.

5 *Viaggio nel cratere*, *A Trip into the Crater* (2003) is the title of one of Arminio’s books expressly devoted to the Irpinia quake. See also Ventura 2015.

6 “Between 1981 and 1991, […] Irpinia seemed to be able to drag, alone, the declining economy of the neighboring provinces. Then, everything stopped. At the end of the decade, the Avellino province found itself with 10,000 inhabitants less and percentages of depopulation reaching, in some areas […] the 30 per cent of the residents” (Erbani 2003: 70). On this point, see also Vitellio 2009: 50–4.

7 The use of extraordinary legislation is not, of course, a novelty. In a juridical encyclopedia (entry "earthquake") dating to the end of the nineteenth century, this extraordinariness is described as follows: "[e]arthquake legislation is a whole blossoming of special magistrates, following in this the old trend […] of fragmenting power as much as possible in order to allow larger systems of patronage" (Fulci 1922: 670).

8 On the bonds between criminal business and politics after the Irpinia earthquake, see for example Legambiente 2000; Behan 2002: 85–105.

9 See Susani 2008: 28; Barbera 2011: 19–20.

10 This testimony is available online on *Guida Sicilia*: http://www.guidasicilia.it/ita/main/news/index.jsp?IDNews=29093#sthash.xNX26dmD.dpuf (accessed September 23, 2014).

11 On this story of mass migration and on its influence on the remaining communities, also in terms of social struggles, see Barbera 2011.

12 Called the "Italian Gandhi" for his nonviolent engagement in socio-political struggles, Danilo Dolci (1924–97) is one of the foremost figures of the twentieth-century Italian social and environmental activism. A short selection of his prolific work translated into English is available in Barron and Re 2003: 283–9.

13 Emphyteusis denotes "a Roman and civil law contract by which a grant is made of a right either perpetual or for a long period to the possession and enjoyment of originally agricultural land subject to the keeping of the land in cultivation or from depreciation, the payment of a fixed annual rent, and some other conditions; also: the heritable and alienable right so granted or the tenure by which it is held" (Merriam-Webster online Dictionary, http://www.merriam-webster.com [accessed December 17, 2014]).

For purposes similar to those described here, another important center, the CRESM (Centro di ricerche economiche e sociali per il Meridione [Economic and Social Research Center for the South]) will be founded in Partanna in 1972 by Lorenzo Barbera. On these aspects see Barbera 2011, Susani 2008. It is interesting to notice that a new branch of the CRESM was founded in Irpinia after the 1980 quake.

14 Comparing the situation of Belice with that of L'Aquila (2009), Goffredo Fofi has written: "In Belice, the presence of a few but strong-minded […] advocates of bottom-up forms of direct democracy […] have provided the example of an extraordinary experiment of grassroots self-government [and] of […] very successful popular struggles. It was also a union of forces that, in today's Abruzzo, has proven almost impossible due to the group and corporative divisions of political clans" (Fofi 2011: 8).

15 Of the so-called Belice-Axis, "only five kilometers out of the projected seventeen were completed due to lack of funds; this impressive elevated four-lane highway ends abruptly in the middle of the desolate western Sicilian countryside, and its sparse traffic was more likely to consist of mules or tractors than automobiles or trucks" (Chubb 2002: 198). In an interview with the newspaper *La Repubblica* (April 1976), the famous architect Paolo Portoghesi explained the choice of privileging highway construction over housing and social services thus: "It is well known that highway contracts are the most lucrative for large firms, those they can rely on for revisions in the plans and price increases in order to realize high profits" (quoted in Chubb 2002: 198).

16 See Camera dei Deputati 1969: 231.

17 As Chubb comments, "the broader issue underlying the […] plans for the reconstruction of the Valle del Belice is the gap between the vision of the intellectual elite (among whom were the leading figures of Italian architecture and urban planning) and the reality of the local society. Despite the good intentions […] the planning process was largely divorced from the social, economic, and cultural context of the Valle del Belice" (Chubb 2002: 194).

18 Some of these criticisms are contemptuous or passionately polemical, such as for example the journalist reportage *Te la do io Brasilia* (*Here Comes Brasilia*) by Mario La Ferla, in which the reconstruction is narrated as a game of political businesses not exempt from criminal interests.

19 "Catastrophe limns the investigation, but companionship propels its trajectory. I speak therefore of the 'inhuman' to emphasize both difference ('in-' as a negative prefix) and intimacy ('in-' as an indicator of estranged interiority)" (Cohen 2015a: 10).

20 See the website of the Fondazione Orestiadi at http://www.fondazioneorestiadi.it/it/ (accessed October 27, 2014).

21 See Clément 2014 and Picon 2000.

22 On L'Aquila's seism see, among others, Erbani 2010.

23 The journal *Nature* dedicated a long article to the case, which is so summarized: "At the end of a 13-month trial, six scientists and one government official have been found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to six years in prison. The verdict was based on how they assessed and communicated risk before the earthquake that hit the city of L'Aquila on 6 April 2009, killing 309 people" (Nosengo 2012: n.p.). As clearly emerged from the trial, the point was not that the seismologists had not been able to "predict" the earthquake—which would be technically impossible—but that they, along with the Civil Protection Department, repeatedly communicated misleading messages to the population,

systematically undermining a concrete risk, instead of implementing effective plans to prevent loss of life. However, at the end of 2014, the Appeal sentence reversed the first verdict. A very accurate discussion about this case, including an analysis of earthquake communication practices in Italy, is provided by Amato et al. 2015.

24 On the biopolitical issues related to L'Aquila's seism, see Castorina and Roccheggiani 2015. On the "New Towns" and L'Aquila's "urban metamorphoses," see Musmeci 2015 and Zizzari 2015.

25 On this, see Salvatore and Mastromarini 2015.

4

Slow

Piedmont's Stories of Landscapes, Resistance, and Liberation

If you travel up and down these hills, in the subtle astronomical zone when summer ends and autumn suddenly begins, you can see why fog is something you can smell and taste in these grapes. It is not by chance that one of Piedmont's finest wines is called Nebbiolo, a wine coming from a literally "foggy" grape. Rising from the ground and flowing over the Tanaro River, the fog bends with the water, slowly caressing the marls and their ancestral sediment. These chemical encounters will be transferred into the ground of the neighboring hills, and then into your glass—a large one, because the wine, just like you, must breathe. Like you, it is alive.

Visiting this area two and a half centuries ago, an illustrious traveler from overseas named Thomas Jefferson tasted Nebbiolo and tried to reproduce it at Monticello, his Italian corner of another Piedmont, the Virginia region. The experiment succeeded a couple of centuries later: chemical encounters, indeed, often take time. And it took me long time, too, almost a decade, to understand that I had to write about this place, where we moved in 2001 after years of intellectual and existential pilgrimage. It took me time, because meeting the mind of place is a difficult process of becoming-together. And this process is slow.

It is a mild January day as I write these pages. While I do so, my thought travels back and forth between the places that surround Savigliano, the small town where we live. Cuneo, Alba, Bra, Barolo, La Morra, Barbaresco, Monforte, Neive, Fossano, Saluzzo—they are the core of my Piedmont. Only some fifty or sixty kilometers further north there is Turin, and it is

so different from here that you feel as if you are on another planet. Indeed, Turin is flat, solid, squared. It is the austere palaces of Italy's first national capital city and Fiat's historic car factories, now flourishing elsewhere. Turin is at once regal, proletarian, and post-industrial. Around Cuneo, the main town of my province, you encounter instead agricultural fields, warehouses, terracotta arcades, and hills; these hills are musical and muscular, sweet and challenging. They are discreet and stubborn, and full of surprises: just scratching at the superficial layers, frozen in the clay and sandstone of Sant'Agata fossil marl, you discover shells. Some thirty million years ago, in fact, these hills were the bed of a huge gulf that would slowly become the Mediterranean Sea. And from that gulf, encircled by the young Alps and pressured from below by the African plate, the Langhe (from the Latin word for "tongues") emerged in the Pliocene. Their calm wave-like rhythm echoes this faraway time, in which other liquid presences were preparing the smells now breathing in your glass.[1]

But the surprises from the underground do not stop at the geo-chemical level. Just a few decades ago, digging deep in these unquiet clods, you could have found weapons left from the Second World War. Like shells and fossils, guns, bullets, and grenades have mingled their radical stories with the roots of hazel trees and vines.

All these presences, old as the earth or younger, like the people living and fighting on these hills, still voice this eloquent place. So, be prepared, Reader. Because theirs are the stories—radical bodily stories of landscape, resistance, and liberation—that our final chapter is slowly going to explore.

Slow violence and landscapes of resistance

In 2014 World Heritage acquired its fiftieth site—the "Vineyard Landscape of Piedmont: Langhe-Roero and Monferrato." The reason for this addition, as explained on the UNESCO webpage, is the "outstanding universal value" of this cultural landscape. Indeed, these vineyards, with their "panoramas of carefully cultivated hillsides […], hilltop villages, castles, Romanesque churches, farms, […] cellars and storehouses," reflect "a long and *slow*" co-evolution of soil, plants, art, and productive practices, thus evoking a

"profound and ancient expertise in the relationship between man [*sic*] and his environment."[2]

To anyone who knows and loves these places, reading this description is exceptionally gratifying. One line, however, captures my attention, besides the (Freudian?) reference to "*man* and *his* environment," to which we shall return. This line is the one about the "long and slow" evolutionary dynamics through which this place has become what the UNESCO experts describe as a universal treasure. One witnesses here, they write, "a slowly developed association" between soils, grape varieties, and winemaking methods. Clearly, in this region the "outstanding value" of the landscape is due to the use human communities have made of it over the centuries, slowly turning it into a new form of natural beauty: a natural-cultural beauty. This glorious alliance flourishes in a setting where hills, vineyards, and hazel groves, along with "a multitude of harmonious built elements," are direct expression of work—farming and agriculture—which is hard, sometimes violent: work, one could say without hyperbole, of mutual subjugation of humans and land.

These thoughts insistently return to my mind whenever I observe the Langhe's scenery from the hilltop of La Morra, a small village with 2,700 residents whose Latin name indicated a sheep enclosure. On this hilltop, something in particular stimulates my thinking, inviting me to go "behind the landscape," as Andrea Zanzotto would say. Indeed, on a spectacular terrace overlooking the most prestigious production sites of Nebbiolo and Barolo wines and visited every year by thousands of tourists, there is a bronze statue dedicated *To the Vinedresser*. The key element about this impressive figure, created in 1972 by a sculptor called Antonio Munciguerra, is the complete absence of peasant rhetoric. The Vinedresser—a shirtless scrawny man, bent on his knees—is not at home in any Arcadia. His head turned to one side, the man looks as crooked as the vine on which he leans and on to which he seems to be grafted. As for the countless Unknown Soldiers, the Vinedresser's face does not convey distinct signs of personality. Even though the grapes he grows might be worth his desperate labor, he seems to be, as an individual, a shadow, defeated. But the really stirring part to me is the human ontology of this composition: an uncanny pre-social hybrid, this man appears to be half-beast and half-slave. His quasi-hallucinated gaze expresses pain, alienation, a state of war with history and with the land.



Antonio Munciguerra, *Al Vignaiolo*. La Morra (2015). Courtesy of Serenella Iovino.

War, history, and the land, like the Vinedresser and the Unknown Soldier, are not put together by chance here. In fact, these now calm and placid places have repeatedly been sites of struggles, of bloodshed, and of resistance. People and territory were conjoined in this warfare. During the Resistance to the Nazi-Fascist occupation in 1943–5, this very landscape physically merged with war; it "did not just surround partisans but penetrated their bodies, leaving profound marks" (Armiero 2011: 162). As Marco Armiero explains in his book *A Rugged Nation: Mountains and the Making of Modern Italy*, "the merging between landscape and rebels was a physiological exchange between nature and bodies, a sort of spiritual hybridisation," something that included a sense of identity, mutual belonging, and a "practical knowledge of the territory" (Armiero 2011: 167).

The neighboring Alps were the partisans' ideal quarters in those two interminable years. But when cold weather, exposure to the elements and—more basically—hunger were too hard to stand, the rebels had no choice but to come down to the hills. The Langhe became therefore a ground for both battle and survival: as we read in famous Resistance novels, such as Cesare Pavese's *La casa in collina* (*The House on the Hill*, 1949), food and shelter were easier to find here than in the cities. Life was apparently safer than in Turin, which was often a target of the Allies' bombings and a site of direct conflict with Mussolini's filo-Nazi Republican troops. Still, these countryside territories were important cores of rebellion and grassroots agitation. Here, tillage and farming went hand in hand with partisan guerrilla strategies. These events and elemental bonds are expressed by landscape and people, which still carry today the signs of that time.

Literature also contributed significantly to conveying these narratives, and the works of Cesare Pavese (1908–50) and Beppe Fenoglio (1922–63), both natives of the Langhe, are eminent examples of it. With their famous novels, translated into many languages, Pavese and Fenoglio have rendered the imagery of these places into an anti-idealistic, often idiosyncratic national epopee. Devoid of any populist allusion or complaisance, their Piedmont is a corporeal and expressive setting of both Resistance and the peasant world, here constantly intermingled with one another. Pavese and Fenoglio's visions of this complex density of elements and events are so powerful that in their stories "the meticulously observed realities of the here-and-now" are often elevated

"to an absolute and timeless mythic level" (Gatt-Rutter 2007: 540). And still, their "myths" are so deeply embedded in these places that the narrative imagination they convey is also always a concrete, physical, and carnal one.

A particularly relevant example of this is Pavese's novel *La luna e i falò* (*The Moon and the Bonfires*, 1950). Depicted against the background of partisan rebellion, the idealization of the protagonist's original homeland clashes here more and more patently with the archaic violence of the rural dimension, whose embodiments powerfully materialize in abused human bodies, nonhuman animals, and land. The novel culminates with the final extermination of a peasant family by the father and master. While definitively sealing the antipastoral severity of this world, this "mythically" tragic ending leaves the cognitive dissonance of nostalgia painfully open.

An even deeper interlacement of the rural setting with the fierceness of war and of Nazi-Fascist reprisals can be found in Fenoglio. In his frequently autobiographic novels, the Langhe becomes the real material-narrative site of partisan struggles, a battlefield where blood flew along with revolutionary discourses and aspirations to freedom.[3] Even today, anyone who visits Alba and the surrounding villages finds a trace of the events described by Fenoglio. They are written not only on memorial plaques, but also on the old brick walls, which still carry hints of bullets; or on the hills and tufa caves that, disguised among the Barbera and Nebbiolo vineyards, still harbor the partisans' hiding places.

Pavese and Fenoglio's novels are a necessary point of entry if you want to delve into the intimate geography of the civil war that took place in northern Italy between Mussolini's Republican brigades and the antifascist partisans after the Armistice.[4] But, since the Resistance and Liberation at which we are looking in this book are wider ecological, political, and cultural concepts, we will take here a lateral path. The violence inscribed in these territories, in fact, is not merely the ostentatious historic and "mythic" violence of war, but also the mundane and whispered *pre-historic* violence in which everyday war and land are mingled—the slow, vegetal violence of patriarchal hierarchies, the violence of destitution and of seclusion from historical processes.[5] This violence is not only the violence of soldiers, but also that of vinedressers and peasants. Because, as La Morra's Vinedresser statue vibrantly exposes, the fierce interpenetration of landscape and bodies was also a "peacetime"

phenomenon in the large area surrounding Cuneo, and this was perfectly legible on the faces and bodies of the Cuneese peasants, themselves sculpted, hardened, and dried up by their radical merging with the land's hardships and with the dynamics of a forced development. This very violence is the object of Nuto Revelli's narrative and documentary work, of his memoirs and monumental oral history archive, both entirely concentrated on this area and its people. By taking this very area and people as texts, he has contributed to revealing the unheeded narrative threads scripted in the flesh of their landscapes.

A friend of Primo Levi's, Nuto Revelli (1919–2004) is one of the most rigorous witnesses and powerful writers of post-Second World War Italy. As another prominent author and comrade of his, Mario Rigoni Stern, has observed, "witnessing was felt by Nuto as a duty […] [His] writing is so clear, precise, dramatic, that the only thing it asks you is to be read" (in Raffaeli 2004: n.p.).[6] Indeed, his language is a "naked, essential Italian, suspicious of any sophistication, the only one capable of leaving behind a centuries-old rhetoric, the jargon of academics and gravestones" (Raffaeli 2004: n.p). Even so, his stature has yet to be fully appreciated by the national (and international) public. One reason for this might be a reductive interpretation of his work, too narrowly circumscribed by the Cuneese "local" dimension. But, far from being complacent regarding any form of localism, this local outlook is indeed his major strength. Revelli himself is aware of this, when, by introducing the first volume of his peasant archive, he writes: "The story of the poor countryside around Cuneo is not a marginal episode […]. It is the story of half-Italy, of the North as well as of the South" (Revelli 1997 [1977]: viii). The reason why this is important on a wider scale, he insists, is that "[a] society that abandons enclaves of poverty and depression to their fate, that suffocates minority groups, is a sick society" (Revelli 1997 [1977]: viii).

The consciousness of being part of the world he attempts to recount and to cognize becomes thus an existential *and narrative* responsibility for him; it turns into, Emmanuel Levinas would say, an essential form of "proximity," of "difference which is non-indifference" (Levinas 1981: 139). From this very standpoint, the building of an expressive dimension for this "vernacular landscape"—a landscape "shaped by the affective, historically textured maps that communities have devised over generations, […] maps alive to significant

ecological and surface geological features," which are "integral to the socio-environmental dynamics of [a] community" (Nixon 2011: 17)—allows him to address one of the key questions about all the stories connecting time, environment, and violence. Like Rob Nixon, in fact, Revelli also asks who really counts as a witness, when experiences are transmitted by people "whose witnessing authority is culturally discounted" (Nixon 2011: 16). The way Revelli responds to this issue is a strategic one: he speaks in the first person, and, with the mediation of an *apparatus* (a magnetic recorder), the people he materially includes in his narrative archives can speak in the first person, too. The documentary framework, coupled with a profound moral comprehension of the witnesses' world and with the fact that Revelli himself is a witness, adds authority to the whole edifice, thus transcending both the "local" level and the individual singularities.

A constant interlacement of voices, including—but not privileging—his own, Revelli's works are a perfect instance, for ecocritics, of what Karen Barad advocates as an entanglement of ontology, ethics, and epistemology. As Barad says,

> We are responsible for the world of which we are part, not because it is an arbitrary construction of our choosing, but because reality is sedimented out of particular practices that we have a role in shaping and through which we are shaped. (Barad 2007: 390)

And so, instead of a cold (and unattainable) objectivity, Revelli's presence responsibly "sediments" together with the world he observes. Their mutual congealing, their intra-action, is the transformation of this "local" into a site and repository of universal categories. It is via this conceptual transition that Revelli is able to see "India" or the "third world" in the Cuneese Alps, allowing us to cognize the practices of resistance and liberation transpiring from this story.[7]

But who was Nuto Revelli? Born in Cuneo, where he spent his entire life running a hardware store, Revelli fought as an officer in the Second World War. He would forever carry the scars of this conflict literally inscribed on his face. After the fall of Fascism in the summer of 1943, however, he became a rebel, a partisan chief. The experience of war and of surviving the terrifying Russian campaign (where some 85,000 Italian soldiers lost their lives) triggered in

him the necessity of better understanding the real social and cultural situation behind the hallucinatory rhetoric of Fascist Italy. In fact, the carnage of war in Russia was also a peasant massacre, and on both sides: a massacre of Russian peasants, seen as "the enemy" in the vast and glacial USSR, and of Italian peasants, enrolled as soldiers in the Fascists' suicidal legions. Almost naturally, Revelli's process of understanding turned into storytelling. As he said to the students of Turin University in 1999 while receiving an honorary degree in education, "To tell and to remember: this was the imperative I carried into my heart from that sorrowful event" (Revelli 2004: n.p.).[8] His individual experience, however, is only a starting point, a first-person observatory that allows him to take full liability for what he sees and tells. And what he sees and tells, during and after the Resistance, are the voiceless presences that war first, and then industrial society, had wiped out from the proscenium of history.

This encompassed of course the soldiers that perished on the front, "the peasants in uniform, who had been sent to die for nothing" (Revelli 2004: n.p.). To these people, Revelli devoted books that have become classics of our post-war narrative, such as *La guerra dei poveri* (*The War of the Poor*, 1962) and *L'ultimo fronte* (*The Last Front*, 1971), works whose common denominator was the search for a posthumous restitution to the "realm of day" of all these human stories lost in the darkness.[9] But Revelli's gaze was going deeper. His "narrative justice" implied indeed a radical stance that embraced all the "defeated," the "friends" as well as the "foes." An example of this attitude comes from one of his last works, *Il disperso di Marburg* (*The Missing Soldier from Marburg*, 1994), "an extraordinarily subtle and moving piece of detective work that crosses a number of genres by combining fiction with a historical and moral enquiry" (Cooke 2011: 166). The book is an account of Revelli's decade-long attempt to give an identity to the dead body of a young German officer, called by the people "*il tedesco buono*" ("the good-hearted German"). Murdered by the partisans in 1944 and abandoned to rot on a small river island, the soldier is "a ghost who wants to have a name" (Rossanda 1994: vii). Indeed, as Rossana Rossanda has insightfully pointed out, "it is not only by burying it, that one gives rest to a lifeless body, but by pronouncing its name" (Rossanda 1994: vi). Revelli knew it, and it was also thanks to his unremitting research that the soldier's name, Rudolf Knaut, could be pronounced and his story told.

What really haunted Revelli, however, was the idea that the restless anonymity of one is the potential anonymity of an entire invisible world. It was this awareness that, in the decades prior to *Il disperso di Marburg*, had moved him to devote the same rigor and passion to a project which can be considered his masterpiece: the creation of an extensive archive of oral histories that would finally give names, faces, and voices to the crowd of the "defeated" of his land. These were the peasants, women, former soldiers, and emigrants of the Cuneo area, all living in this large territory comprising hills, mountains, and plain, which was being dramatically transformed by industrial development and other socio-environmental metamorphoses. Revelli recognized in them the silent throng of nameless and marginal figures, many of whom had been sent to slaughter "for nothing" during the war, and that were now disappearing from the limelight of history without having previously emerged from the dark. In this poor multitude, exploited and forgotten, Revelli identified those who had paid the highest price for building our national "democratic freedoms."

The "world of the defeated"—defeated by history, by the metanarrative monopoly of industrial "progress"—was one that had been "othered" and marginalized. And, paradoxically, this marginalization was both a fact and a legacy. As Rob Nixon put it with clarity, "the poor face the double challenge of invisibility and amnesia: numerically, they may constitute the majority, but they remain on the margins in terms of visibility and official memory" (Nixon 2011: 65). Their first reintegration therefore had to be, Revelli unquestionably indicated, a narrative and an ethical one:

> Statistical data […] are a "history" written by "the others" […]. I want instead to give voice to those who have been forever marginalized, the deaf-mute, those who have survived the great genocide, and I want them to speak, as they would do in a true democracy. The world of the defeated is the one that gives me hope, charging me with a young rage, pushing me to fight against today's wrongful society. (Revelli 1997: xxvi)

This narrative redemption materialized in Revelli's *Il mondo dei vinti* (*The World of the Defeated*, 1977) and *L'anello forte* (*The Strong Link*, 1985), two unparalleled books in the horizon of Italian contemporary culture. Like a great painting, these collections at once shed light on a world of rural poverty and migrations, on the wounds and memories of Resistance and war, and on

women's vital role in these families. The visual association with *The Fourth Estate* (1901), the iconic masterpiece by the Piedmontese painter Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo, is here almost inescapable.

In years of patient work, helped by "intermediaries" who introduced him into these shy family circles, Revelli collected several hundreds of testimonies: 270 for the first volume, and 260 for the second. Equipped with a Japanese recorder, he taped and then carefully transcribed the interviews, respecting the speakers' patois inflections, their narrative rhythms, and even their repetitions: themes returned, but eventually every single plot was unique. Although his stance in these pages is perceivable and clear, Revelli kept his position carefully separated from that of the single speakers. His method was based "on a rigorous distinction of voices" (Portelli 1997: 134). His words are audible in long and accurate introductions, which are actually stories in themselves; but then, the sequence of the informants' chronicles gives "meaning to the shadows of the individual lives" (Portelli 1997: 134). In the first choral collection, the stories selected for publication are eighty-five, mostly told by men; in the second, they are one hundred and eight, and are all relayed by women.[10]

In these two books Revelli accounted not only for the "anthropological" disappearance of peasants, the abandonment of mountainous regions, and the industrial terato-mutation of large portions of the Cuneese countryside, polluted and environmentally degraded. He also accounted for the host of pain and violence that characterized the peasant world itself. He looked at this world with sympathy and with a strong sense of social justice, but never with uncritical acquiescence. His standpoint was stated clearly:

> I did not mythicize the old peasant society. I knew that the ancient time of fireflies and chickadees was happy only in the pages written by the "others," the men of letters, the "learned" ones. My witnesses […] did not talk to me about fireflies and chickadees, but about the hunger for bread, about the misery of a time. (Revelli 1998 [1985]: xviii–xix)

As these words lucidly indicate, the major target of Revelli's criticism was the artificial idyll of "fireflies and chickadees," the deceptive pastoralism of tourists who love "to spend the weekend in the countryside," stopping their perception at the picturesque level (Revelli 1997 [1977]: xxvi). Besides mystifying the reality of the rural world, this "mythic nostalgia" obscures individuals and

issues of environmental justice, overshadowing "stark contrasts in social, political […] and […] ecological terms" (Sullivan 2015: 115). In the world voiced by Revelli, instead, "[t]he peasant was a mere object, and he knew he was" (Revelli 1997: xxii). A vision of the pastoral as "an ideologically compromised form because of its deployment […] in service of class and imperial or metropolitan interests" (Phillips 2003: 16) is thus reinforced and substantiated via the hundreds of personal testimonies collected by Revelli. It is in their stories that a *literature of liberation*, one condensing the struggles of living beings against the dangerous mystifications of oppressive metanarratives, concretely materializes.

The stories that Revelli liberates in his two fundamental books are, indeed, stories of need and deep poverty. These are stories of slow, patriarchal violence, in which the land and the peasants' bodies are interlaced with the fierceness of war first, and then with the costs of industrial development. Revelli displays a world typically populated by gender hierarchies, by social exclusion, marginalization of disabled people. Indeed, in more than one testimony the frequent malformations and heritable genetic damages as a result of penury, malnutrition and even incest appear as a physical refutation of the Fascist rhetoric about the healthiness and strength of "our peasant race."[11] Here Revelli's account significantly resonates with a crudely realistic description of rural Piedmont made by Italo Calvino in his novel *The Watcher* (1963):

> It was a hidden Italy, […] the reverse of the Italy that flaunts itself in the sun, that walks the streets, that demands, produces, consumes; this was the secret of families and of villages, it was also […] rural poverty with its debased blood, its incestuous coupling in the darkness of the stables… (Calvino 1971: 17–18).

Articulated in the materiality of its bodily texts, Revelli's peasant world ushers thus into a "dark pastoral" (Sullivan 2014a, 2015), a mode which, delivering "self-reflection and productive tensions […], invokes the power of inevitable idyllic urges and lunges into artifice" (Sullivan 2014a: p. 88).

Another often obscured aspect, in this introverted rural world, was the individuals' emotional life. The choice to dedicate a second volume explicitly to the stories of peasant women is therefore subversively revelatory of a comprehensive liberation stance, which includes all those who—by "nature" or by society—are considered weak subjects. By recording the first

testimonies Revelli had noticed that, even in those families where women were key figures (hence "The Strong Link"), the narratives were mostly male-centered, often suppressing or silencing crucial spots of family life such as affection, love, female exploitation and self-representation, the sphere of sex and motherhood. "Women were teaching me—he remarked—that the war of the poor never ends" (Revelli 1998: xvii). Embodied in "'hyper-separated' and hierarchical gender oppositions" (Garrard 2004: 54), the patriarchal logic was thus dominating even in the common struggle against poverty and hardships. This is, after all, the same implicit logic behind the reference to "*man* and *his* environment" whose productive relationship has created, according to the UNESCO experts, the "outstanding universal value" of these places.[12]

After voicing the "mute" people of this "defeated" world, Revelli's aim became therefore "to give a voice to the […] peasant woman, so that she might finally *write* her story" (Revelli 1998: xix, emphasis in the original). The fact that "*write*" is here italicized is not a minor detail: this emphasis explicitly signals the passage from being relegated to the oral dimension, to a level of knowledge transmission that eventually becomes historical. The history that these women had to write was a story of toil, of domestic abuses perpetrated by their parents and brothers, and of repeated childbirths, often as a result of their husbands' assaults. Maternity indeed was also an ambiguous subject. Whereas for the men to have many children was a reason for pride, for the peasant women this came at an enormous price; moreover, these children were often seasonally "rented" as cowherds if boys, or sent to France as maids or violet harvesters if girls. Through all these practices, the women and children's bodies were thus often "dispossessed," as Antonella Tarpino has observed (Tarpino 2013: vii). But this was also a world "dense with metaphysics" (Tarpino 2013: vii), a dimension suspended between faith, poverty, and superstition, inhabited by witches (here called "*masche*"), natural healers, and girls who traded their hair braids for fabric. Not rarely, in this world, was the women's marginalization intertwined with the ideological pressure of religious authorities.

A decisive chapter in this hidden "war of the poor" was the stories of the numerous girls "imported" from the depressed southern regions, chiefly Calabria. Especially from the 1970s, local girls were becoming reluctant to

constrain themselves to such an existence of hard labor and meager reward. Therefore, as Revelli unexpectedly discovered, southern girls were convinced by matchmakers to come to Cuneo's large countryside and marry the peasant bachelors. In this "meeting between two different but symmetric poverties" (Bonansea 1988: 69), women paid with their own bodies and emotions both "for secular injustices and for the modern wrongs caused by short-sighted economic policies" (Bonansea 1988: 68). But, by embedding their "bone lands" into the new one, they also became a "strong link" that unified two opposite and equally marginal corners of Italy.[13] All these elements, as Corrado Stajano wrote, make of *The Strong Link* a huge "peasant *Spoon River*," a "figuration of Italian society in which the most excluded among the excluded—women—have a voice, a gigantic family tree […] which must be taken into account by whoever will write the history of unified Italy" (Stajano 1985: xx).

The peasant world, seen beyond pastoral idealisms, was thus a world of slow violence in a sense that expands Rob Nixon's view: the intergenerational, interspecies and gendered violence of patriarchal hierarchies, which had lasted for centuries, if not millennia. It was a "structural" oppression rooted in the necessity of unmovable orders, in the combination of abuse and lack—both technological and social—of emancipation, in the naturalization of forms of family enslavement and in archaic systems of labor exploitation. And slow violence was the one that "dispossessed," modified, and bent the peasant bodies, themselves yoked by groundwork up to the point of disappearing, as individuals, in the body of the land.

But slow violence in the "defeated" world revealed itself also in the blurred contact zone between the rural and the industrial dimension. With deep socio-ecological awareness, in fact, Revelli raised the question of environmental disruption, a question through which landscapes' and bodies' joint immersion "within power structures that have real material effects" clearly appeared (Alaimo 2010: 86). Revelli's criticism, again, was not driven by naive ideological biases. As he wrote,

> I did not detest the new industrial society. I was scared by the industry that had won hands down. The Bormida River, more polluted than a sewer, to me looked like the symbol of the winners. The yellow ground, saddened by herbicides, looked like the symbol of the defeated. My obsession was that one had to strike

> a balance between agriculture and industry, before it was too late. Before that the only one to survive was the army of crows. (Revelli 1998: xviii–xix)

This passage is extremely important. In many respects, industry could have been (and sometimes was) a form of liberation for the poor peasants. The clash between the industrial and rural world, however, took place as the factory was re-introducing hierarchies and exploitation, with which came a novel and much stronger ecological risk, as in the case of the Bormida River or of the uranium mines on Mount Bisalta, near Cuneo. In particular in these mines, held by Montecatini (a company which will participate in Porto Marghera's Montedison), many workers "died soon, died badly, with their lungs petrified. And the living, the survivors, are all ill with silicosis" (Revelli, 997: xxxvii). Along the course of the Gesso river, at the Bisalta's foothills, the "cement quarries continue to eat the mountains, and they even change the valley's topography" (Revelli 1997: lxix). In all respects, the agriculture in this area had become "subaltern to the factory"—it was an "agriculture of the worker-farmer" (Revelli 1998: xix).

By reflecting on the different levels and forms of material subordination, however, Revelli was pinning down two crucial points. The first was the misery of the peasant world—a misery challenging any possible idealization. The second was the misery of the industrial one, which had simply superimposed itself on the former, without emancipating it first, without liberating it. Both miseries were clearly written on the land's body: "The 'regime chronicles' exalt the 'happy marriage between industry and the poor country' […]. But the truth is under our eyes; *the landscape is the one that speaks*" (Revelli 1997: xxvii–viii, emphasis added). And so, in the gray zone where this ill-fated "marriage" was materializing, the landscape along with all its living manifestations revealed "the typically obscured processes of dehumanization […] that constitute the slow, structural […] violence of capitalism" (Wald 2014: n.p.). The violence that we find at work here is exactly the kind of violence that Priscilla Wald has called "vegetal violence": a "violence that works slowly and structurally, the long term impact of which is registered in changes" in the corporeal and textual geographies of territories and people (Wald 2014: n.p.). This violence is disseminated as a language and as a system of signs in these grounds and bodies. Directly emanating from them, Revelli's narrative

ethics combines therefore the sensorial immediacy of elemental agencies with a claim for social and *historical* justice. Rivers, too, speak for all this:

> In the Bormida Valley the river […] is a snake of disgusting sludge that poisons the environment. The Bormida's fog is kneaded with poison, it rises upward, and where fog arrives, plague also arrives. The blackmail imposed by masters is pitiless […]: do you want your children in the factory? Then enjoy the poison.
>
> The Vermenagna stream flew in a plastic bed, the whitish water transported silica to the plain, it plastified ditches and canals, it cluttered the aquifer faults, mortified the humus, withered the fields. Thirty, forty kilometers away from the sites of the extractive industries, water was still milky, polluted. […] Here is the balance of powers. Poisons […] are the result of the society that counts; the shy protests of the peasant world are the litanies of the society that dies. (Revelli 1997: xxix)

The story of the Bormida Valley deserves closer attention. Located at the border between Liguria and Piedmont, its wounded river and ecosystem are another major chapter of the Italian industrial metanarrative. The pollution came here from the Azienda Coloranti Nazionali e Affini (ACNA), a factory of coloring substances that stayed active in the small town of Cengio over more than a century. Forcefully decommissioned by the left-wing Minister for the Environment Edo Ronchi in 1999, during its long "life" ACNA "provided the Ligurian people with jobs and the Piedmontese with toxic pollution" (Pergolizzi 2012: 133). Initially, the industrial unit, established under another name in 1882, produced explosive materials, including the chemical weapons used in Libya, Abyssinia, and Eritrea by the Fascist troops in Mussolini's colonial wars.[14] Then, the Cengio plant started manufacturing nitric acid and other persistent organic compounds, mostly derived from benzene.[15] Acquired in 1966 by Montedison (the same corporation controlling Porto Marghera's Petrolchimico), ACNA's production came to encompass betaoxynaphtoic (BON) acid, potassium salt, and phthalocyanines.

In 120 years of industrial activity, 374 lethal chemical compounds were spread from Cengio to the surrounding areas, contaminating agricultural land, aqueducts, wells, and the whole Bormida watershed. As Antonio Pergolizzi reports in his book *Toxic Italy*, in Cengio's subsoil "some two million cubic meters of hazardous waste, toxic pollutants and fouled ground" have been detected (Pergolizzi 2012: 133). Like Marghera's industrial peninsulas, the

hills arisen little by little in the plant's environs are also entirely made of waste. But the awareness about the disaster was an early phenomenon in this area: already in 1909 the aquifers of three municipalities were irretrievably poisoned, and their use had been prohibited by the authorities. The situation of ecological ruin had become chronic already in the 1930s, but all the trials, initiated from 1938 to 1982 with the aim of stopping production and protecting the health of people and land, resulted in total defeats for the citizens of Bormida.[16] When, in the early years of the economic boom, Beppe Fenoglio put the river in the background of one of the tales included in his collection *Un giorno di fuoco* (*A Day of Fire*, 1963), Bormida's biocide was already a fact:

> Have you ever seen Bormida? Its water has the hue of clotted blood, because it carries away the waste of Cengio's factories, and not a blade of grass grows on its banks anymore. Such a foul and poisoned water that it freezes your marrow, especially if you see it under the moonlight (Fenoglio 1988: 10–11).

Until 1982 toxic pollutants were discarded directly in the river and in the neighboring areas. After that, however, many loopholes to dodge legal restraints were found. One of these was the unlawful disposal of industrial waste. Investigations have revealed that tons of toxic sludge coming from the ACNA factory have been illicitly discarded in Naples's dumping sites for years, as a result of the complicity game between industrial managers and ecomafia clans (cf. Pergolizzi 2012: 134). *Tout se tient*, in our porous landscapes of pollution and slow violence.

But apparently there is good news: the latest reports suggest that the Bormida Valley's reclamation works, started in 1999, have now been completed.[17] Whether this unexpected happy ending is accurate and not a governmental or journalistic amplification, this whole story should be a warning against the way the "reckless short-termism" (Nixon 2011: 22) of both politics and industrial procedures collides with the subterranean pace of their systematic violence.[18] The fact that the Bormida river is once again "alive" and "suitable for fishing," as the newspapers say, does not erase the thousand cases of human and nonhuman illness and death that a century of environmental injustice has generously distributed in this area.[19] Because, if all this happened, it was also due to the inertia of national authorities and to a legislative system that for too

long has failed to adequately punish environmental crimes as such. But this is something to which we shall return.

Shedding light on the dynamics of violence that crisscross and surround the peasant world is essential to understand the real material narrative scripted in the beauty of this landscape. If every landscape is a storied territory which is both "a geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness," a compound fabric entailing "a place and the ideas that have developed about how to live in that place" (Berg and Dasmann 1977: 36), then it would be impossible to appreciate the "outstanding universal value" of UNESCO's Vineyard Landscape of Piedmont apart from its tangible bodily stories. In an unprecedented way, Revelli has contributed to undrape this unknown Arcadia in its most concrete expressions, revealing the dark sides of this world, its suffocated meanings, and also its intrinsic vitality, so often smothered by the self-celebrating rhetoric of industrial development. But the gist of Revelli's contribution lies in the universality of his "local" pictures. Interlacing dynamics of poverty, emigration, and industry, the stories he collected are always already trans-local and trans-corporeal, thus outstripping the mere "situatedness" of their narrators.

This discourse allows me to underline another vital point, namely the importance of including the "world of the defeated" in the constellation of slow violence. Being subjected to both the aggressions of industry and the ferocity of patriarchal relations, the "defeated" go through a "slow violence" that is at once individual, environmental, and "structural." It is a violence which encompasses this world from within and from without: from within, with its interlaced forms of oppression and hyper-separation, with its archaic and antipastoral "war of the poor"; from without, with the reckless attacks carried out by industrial development, which is itself a "progress" without liberation, a state of expanded hierarchies subjugating both humans and land.

By giving voice to the "mute and deaf" people and framing their testimonies in an historical narrative, Revelli's account of these entangled forms of violence becomes instrumental to a real project of liberation, also actively responding to the "representational challenges" raised by Nixon's notion (Nixon 2011: 10). The function of storytelling in this challenge is, indeed, crucial for letting "the unapparent appear, making it accessible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses" (Nixon 2011:

15). With the verbal and bodily narratives coming from his witnesses and from himself, Revelli has exposed the often-unapparent disturbing side of the peasant world, showing that Arcadia is a myth through which the capitalist system builds and reinforces its false consciousness, thus enacting its own metanarrative of self-redemption. But what emerges from this picture is also that the internal oppression of the peasant world is the element that made it vulnerable to the violence of an ecologically abstract and self-legitimizing development. Revelli's "dark pastoral" was therefore a way to denounce a historico-anthropological suppression, as Italo Calvino, by reviewing *Il mondo dei vinti*, lucidly observed:

> All nostalgia about such a world cannot be but a mystification […]; this, however, does not exclude the bitterness for the fact that, instead of a possible transformation [of this world] into an agricultural society worth this name, we behold [its] bare dissolution into nothing. (Calvino 1977)

By offering a dispassionate portrayal of this world, however, Revelli has also created the conditions for reappraising peasant cultures and knowledges. This reconsideration is both ethical and historical. It is not a simplistic form of sympathy, but the effort to establish social justice as a critical discourse mediated by the self-awareness of these marginalized individuals and groups. Here another valuable insight comes from Priscilla Wald's notion of vegetal violence. One of the aspects of this violence, Wald maintains, is its switching capacity, namely its power to break previous balances: "Once visible, vegetal violence, can inspire the vegetal (in its other meaning, embryonic) violence of a response; this counter-violence begins its slow transformative process." Revelli's works entail and facilitate this "transformative process" in the form of an evolution that "is more radically propelled by social than by biological change" and which replaces "the crisis of survival with the social justice question of how we want to live" (Wald 2014: n.p.).

The "counter-violence" of this evolutionary shift is liberated in the very moment the "defeated" acquire a narrative dimension of their own. It is from this self-appropriation that the voiceless peasants consciously enter an historical dimension, initiating a material path toward emancipation. This is what Hubert Zapf, in his theory of cultural ecology, has identified as the "a re-integrative inter-discourse" brought up by literature. According to this

view, literary narratives have the capacity to represent deficits, conflicts, and unevenness "within dominant systems of […] power" (Zapf 2006: 62). Through this capacity, they perform a compensative and balancing function, orienting the evolutionary dynamics of cultural discourse toward the reintegration of "what is marginalized, neglected, repressed or excluded" (Zapf 2006: 56). In my own view, this capacity belongs not only to literature, but to narratives in general.[20]

In our case, the mirror of narrative and self-reflection is the way in which the peasant world can face its own host of violence, as well as its historical fragility to a top-down-imposed development. It is via this mirror that the peasant world's "neglected biophilic energies can find a symbolic space of expression and of (re-)integration" (Zapf 2010: 138). The self-awareness implied by this narrative articulation is thus a redemption for the world of the "defeated." It is this very awareness that enabled a re-appropriation of the beauty and enormous natural-cultural potentialities of these territories. And so, if Piedmont's hills of Langhe-Roero and Monferrato are now the fiftieth UNESCO World Heritage Site, this is also thanks to a counter-narrative originating from Revelli's geographies of resistance. What this counter-narrative teaches us is that no landscape is immune from violence, and that what we often take for granted is the result of a slow and difficult process of distillation.

It takes time for oppressive forces to sediment, in the storied landscape of territories and bodies. Dormant like the Pliocene shells in the Tanaro marls, these forces are still here, and are co-essential with the beauty of this place. They also are, if not a heritage for the world, a lesson for us. But, just as the vinedressers' pain morphs into the elegance of a Nebbiolo glass, a moment also arrives in which dark pastorals become filtered of their violence. It is then that, slow but vigorous, they can turn into leverage for liberation.

Land and liberation: Slow food

One of the first things to capture your eye when you visit Bra, a neat baroque town whose original settlements date back to the Neolithic age, is the recurring figurine of a snail, an elegant red little snail, which is the symbol of

whatever is locally grown, healthy, sustainable, tied to traditional knowledges, and—beyond any reasonable doubt—good to eat. Since 1986, the year of Slow Food's inception in the incubatory form of "Arcigola," a left-wing recreational association based on food culture, this red snail stands for a movement/philosophy that, disproving the sluggishness of its icon, has rapidly become a worldwide phenomenon, with a network of around 100,000 members and 2,000 "food communities" engaged in small-scale and ecologically aware food production.[21]

Established in Bra by Carlo Petrini and a group of socially and culturally committed people who happened to be also food and wine connoisseurs, Slow Food has as its primary ambition to counter the dissemination of the "fast food" lifestyle and to prevent the decline of local gastronomic traditions as forms of cultural biodiversity. From its small headquarters in Bra's ancient Via della Mendicità Istruita, this "grassroots organization" is active today "in over 150 countries" and brings together "millions of people passionate about good, clean and fair food."[22] Its members and affiliates include "chefs, youth, activists, farmers, fishers, experts and academics," people and communities that share knowledges and support local realities, with the common goal to put the "good, clean, and fair" philosophy of Slow Food into practice. And this practice is both cultural and ecological, as testified by the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity, the Slow Food Presidia, the Terra Madre Network and biennial World Meeting, and the University of Gastronomic Sciences, opened in Pollenzo, near Bra, in 2004. Not a small trail, for a little red snail.

This networking effort, however, is something more than the result of a particularly successful communication strategy. Slow Food mirrors a conceptual, and ethico-historical, elaboration that reaches the world in many ways and that, as Jane Bennett has also observed, might "reform the public that once coalesced under the banner of 'environmentalism'" (Bennett 2010: 50). Indeed, as we read in the English edition of Petrini's manifesto-book *Slow Food: Le ragioni del gusto* (*Slow Food: The Case for Taste*), the Slow Food "recipe" purports to "wed pleasure to awareness and responsibility, study and knowledge, and to offer opportunities for development even to poor and depressed regions through a new model of agriculture" (Petrini 2003: xvii–xviii).

Published in Italy in 2001, *Slow Food: Le ragioni del gusto* summarizes almost two decades of collective explorations, campaigns, tests, and tastings made by these "democratic and antifascist gluttons" (Petrini 2003: 11) in the field of what would become a new discipline: eco-gastronomy. The spirit of the movement could not be clearer: an activist philosophy rooted in the belief that food is not just part of our bodily existence, but also a way to connect our body with other bodies, whether via the food chain, crop growing, politics, or the shared pleasures of conviviality. Petrini calls the pursuit of these principles "a gastronomy for liberation": "liberation from […] unevenness, oppressions, violence perpetrated on environment and people, the scandal of hunger and malnutrition" (Petrini 2013a: 7).

As the international and indigenous Slow Food communities increasingly attest, there are no borders for this liberation. Its core values constitute a political ecology platform that expands worldwide and starts directly from the soil, from agriculture. If "eating is an agricultural act," as Petrini, quoting Wendell Berry, concurs (Petrini 2013b [2005]: 63; Berry 1990: 146), then it is also undeniable that "in most of the primary choices we make in our every-day lives we are implicated in the fate of agriculture" (Major 2011: 1). But the "fate of agriculture" is also the fate of regional or indigenous communities, forms of natural-cultural knowledge, and endangered living species and environments, both on a local and on a planetary scale. All these realities are constantly threatened by the unsustainable speed of "the present paradigm of extractive farming," as Barbara Kingsolver calls it (Kingsolver 2007: 169). In response to all that, the core of this Piedmontese philosophy/movement is its pace, which is purposefully *slow* as a reaction to the accelerated tempo imposed by global capitalism on one of our basic living functions—eating—and on the interlaced systems of exploitation on which this function depends when it is industrially controlled.

Along with being an ecological approach, respectful of the rhythm of seasons and agricultural production, the "slow" of Slow Food is thus an affirmative ethical-political claim: it is the claim for food justice, which means justice for the people that eat the food, justice for the communities that produce it, justice for the land that sustains the production, and justice for the biosphere that enables these processes and eventually absorbs their effects. In Petrini's words, this is "the assumption of responsibility for the future;

the salvation of a heritage of memory, biodiversity, and creative capacity; and the affirmation of a pleasure principle" (Petrini 2003: xix) as an alternative to violence and exploitation in their various forms. Said otherwise, an eco-gastronomy for liberation.

The commitment to contrasting the superpower of global agro-industry and acting in favor of the rights and creativity of the world's food communities, the defense of environmental beauty, the cultivation of landscape as well as of land, the joys of conviviality and measure, the respect for human and nonhuman subjects involved in the production process: all this is part of the attempt made by a group of "antifascist gluttons" to couple taste for good food with ecological and cultural values. But the detail that often escapes the international "slow-foodies" (Pollan 2006: 260), especially those who are most concentrated on the "gratifying" side of the message, is that Petrini's eco-gastronomy is in principle a comprehensive message of liberation. And this message of liberation has a specific *terroir* of ideas and historical experiences. One of the coordinates of such *terroir* is the socio-political landscape of Resistance of the Cuneo area, famously Italy's "most partisan" province. The frequent usage of a "partisan" vocabulary, whose keyword is precisely "liberation," testifies to this.[23] But equally necessary to understand Slow Food is its radical tie to the peasant world of this region, a world entirely populated by Revelli's "defeated" and their dense bodily stories. Going over his first eco-gastronomical steps at the end of the 1970s, Petrini himself was explicit about his alliance of visions with Revelli:

> It was during that period that I met Nuto Revelli, who had just written his great work, […] *The World of the Defeated* […]. [His] method, and […] sensibility, immediately won me over, especially as during those years my visits to the […] Langhe often brought me into contact with the people who were the object of his research. […] After all, these were my people […]. (Petrini 2013b: 472–3)

And here again:

> it was all thanks to the inspiration that Revelli gave me through his incredible work: those words conveyed all the life, the gastronomy, the economy, the culture, the social life of those times—hard times, when the people, amid great privations, were active subjects who contributed to the transformation of the land. (Petrini 2013b: 475)

The "subjects" that Petrini describes as "[his] people" include La Morra's Vinedresser and all the marginal women and men that have converted this land from a territory of "great privations" to a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Creating a dynamical continuity with those efforts, Slow Food's actions have also considerably contributed to this transformation. But without Revelli's work this big shift would be simply unthinkable. His witnessing is in fact the major source of collective self-awareness for these "subjects"; it was their narrative empowerment. As Petrini noted, linking together Revelli's method and the Terra Madre indigenous communities, "When […] I saw […] the participants and heard their stories, I became even more convinced that the mission of cataloguing was vitally important and that it should be implemented […] in the first place by the communities themselves" (Petrini 2013b [2005]: 476).

Integrating "vernacular" epistemologies and ecologies in the form of a "slow knowledge" (Petrini 2013b [2005]: 411 *et passim*), Slow Food has become an integral part of the material and political counter-narrative of the "defeated" world. Far from being a folkloristic limbo, this "slow knowledge" is a cognitive reserve of biocultural practices accumulated over time, in spite of all hierarchies of power, ethnicity, age, or gender. Slow Food's discourse thus turns "subaltern" ideas and voices into tangible expressions of a "subaltern cosmopolitanism": an emancipatory strategy whose cornerstone is an "ecology of knowledges" and whose "claims and criteria of social inclusion reach beyond the horizon of global capitalism" (de Sousa Santos 2007: 63). The Terra Madre Network is the very expression of this subaltern cosmopolitanism. Its biennial World Meeting, in particular, provides a forum for cross-cultural encounters for farmers, food community members, activists, and social ecologists from all parts of the globe. Periodically, on the occasion of the meeting, peasants and small producers, mostly from "southern" countries and in many cases women, come to Turin, where they live with local families and residents that voluntarily host them for the sake of exchanging knowledges outside the circuit of corporate globalism.[24]

To read Slow Food "eco-gastronomical liberation" against Revelli's stories is helpful to clarify that an ecologically desirable society does not mean a return to an old-style peasant Eden. This Eden, indeed, has never really existed; it was so, as Revelli said, only in the tales of the "others." But the realization

of this fact does not exclude the coming into being of a "democratic and antifascist" vision of food production that tries to reconcile people and the land based on a more gentle scale of values and rhythms. Slow Food advocates for this "liberated" relationship with the land and with our bodily needs: a relationship that ought to be more culturally strong, ethically humane, and ecologically aware. This worldwide group of enlightened epicures invites us to share, to enjoy the pleasure of healthy encounters with people and land, to set the conditions to extend this pleasure and health to other beings, and to do it over time.

Of course, there are critical points in the Slow Food project, and the first one is the frequent accusation of elitism, implied by its economic practicability, and partly also by the fact that, especially in Western countries, being a "slow-foodie" has become a status among the better-off strata of society. Apparently, there might be some truth in this: this "slow revolution" has not penetrated the market, and hence the prices of "good, clean, and fair" foods are not affordable on a mass scale. This view is also reinforced by the recent expansion of costly shopping centers for Italian food in Italy and abroad, where many products protected by Slow Food are marketed. On closer examination, however, this charge, rather than providing real criticism to Slow Food's *values*, risks being instrumental in preserving the financial status quo. In fact, the very goal of contrasting food monopolies and "extractive agriculture"—both significantly more discriminatory and expensive for societies and planet than "eating locally"—is precisely an idea of food justice.[25] The principle is not that of having expensive food branded as "good food" but that of returning (or finally giving) dignity to farmers and agricultural communities, appreciating their traditional knowledges and attributing intrinsic value to historic agricultural landscapes. As Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi note, Slow Food's ethics ensure that "the benefits of eating locally and sustainably are shared by all who participate, from the farm to the producer and the laborer to the community" (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010: 186). This justice is not aimed at privileging the interests of big food corporations, but at protecting people and places as natural-cultural collectives. If Slow Food remains, as it ought to be, faithful to these principles, without becoming a façade-philosophy for elite retailers and practitioners, then it really will be the key movement for practices of food justice and ecological liberation.

On the other hand, vegans and "meatless eaters" (such as I am) might be not completely happy with the Slow Food omnivorous menu. And I concur with Jane Bennett that this discourse of liberation could be fortified if Slow Food "broadened its focus beyond the activities of humans," instead of implicitly perpetuating "the idea that nonhuman materiality is essentially passive stuff" (Bennett 2010: 51). The coherent pursuit of this liberation, like any other, requires in fact a more-than-human compass. This is yet another open front on which we—witnesses ourselves to many defeated worlds—are all called to take a stance.

What is however undeniable is that, even if still somehow perfectible, the "slow revolution" that timidly started here thanks to Revelli, Petrini, and "their" people and communities is not only a claim for "local" rebirth or more sustainable forms of *jouissance*. In unfastening the bonds of patriarchal ties and territorial aggression, this "revolution" is also a slow but resolute liberation of messages, meanings, and dynamic identities through which local landscapes become cosmopolitan territories of resistance. It is in these new slow, concrete, and anti-idealistic landscapes that the vinedressers and peasants of all the invisible Souths can finally retrieve their names.

A (slow) epilogue

Nebbiolo and its nobler descendants, Barolo and Barbaresco, are austere wines. Unadorned, they send you a message of density and slowness. A message of severity, of how long it takes for these clayey sods to diffract in dozens of fragrances—here sour cherry, there dried plum; again, pomegranate, and berries; and then, in sequence, woods, oak and clay, chocolate, tobacco, meat, and blood … It takes time to taste these wines, to learn them. Most of all, however, it takes them time to become what, by way of natural and of cultural processes, they can be. Winemakers know that. They know when to harvest the grapes (and Nebbiolo grapes are harvested slowly, late in the season); they know how to delicately crush them, how to leave them in the maceration process, how to press them, and blend them, and let the wine age … Winemakers know that the chemical encounters that will happen as soon as the wine starts to breathe in our glasses depend on



Anthophyllite asbestos, scanning electron microscope picture. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

a slow and patient labor of combinations. They know all that. And after all everybody, regardless on his or her wine expertise or taste, will agree: the good slow aging of wine belongs to our collective imagination from time immemorial.

The image you're seeing is an asbestos fiber under the microscope. It's so hedgy and fragmented. It will take it time to settle in your lungs. The time of asbestos is even slower than wine's time: it can last twenty, thirty years. But, once there, through a weird sequence of intra-actions, a form of cancer may develop, which will make your days run faster than ever. Until a point when, all of a sudden, they'll stop.

It was in 1898 that for the first time the scientific community expressed concerns about the potential health-impairing effects of asbestos fibers. These concerns were confirmed in the 1930s.[26] The time of science might be slow: scientific discoveries need time to be tested, to be acknowledged, and recorded. But the time of industry, commerce, and politics—so fast indeed when it comes to produce, consume, and campaign—can be even slower, when regulations and restrictions are concerned. Politics, industry, and commerce know how to be slow, even motionless, when it comes to restricting privileges or banning particularly profitable productions, and Marghera's story is a good example of such sloth. And here is another one: in Italy, in fact, the processing and manufacturing of asbestos was prohibited only in 1992, but this material is still purchased and variously used. This information takes me by surprise in these mild January days of 2015, as a newspaper advises me that, as recently as 2012, Italy imported from India about 1,040 tons of asbestos.[27] Despite 1992's ban, as Piero Bevilacqua remarked in 2006, "the large-scale decontamination operation started years ago is still not completed. At least fifty dangerous industrial sites still need to be cleaned up" (Bevilacqua 2010: 23).[28] One of these sites is in Casale Monferrato. It lies near here, at the border of the new UNESCO World Heritage Site, whose complete name, we want to remember, is Langhe-Roero *and Monferrato*. Situated not far from the Monferrato Barbera winehills, the Eternit factory has disseminated asbestos fibers in the environment for decades. In Canale, asbestos was everywhere—in roofs, houses, storage places, in factories, in the air, and finally in the lungs of the population. It has been for many years in Piedmont's tribunal courts, too, as shown by two criminal trials, started in Turin in 1993, and continued over the last decade. A sentence pronounced in 2012 recognized the offense for 3,000 victims.

But here comes the update. In November 2014, due to the same disastrous mix of inertia and legislative deficit that we have witnessed in the Bormida Valley, Eternit's executives, including its owner and CEO, one Swiss philanthropist called Stephan Schmidheiny, were acquitted from the accusation of environmental disaster. This shocking sentence, which has humiliated an entire community and appalled the majority of the people in this country, is another emergence of slow violence. Here, too, a still inadequate legal framework decreed a statute of limitations for a crime whose perpetrators

had been actually found guilty. Regardless of the fact that pleural mesothelioma has a latency period of twenty to thirty years, the court sentenced that the crime ended in the very moment the factory was closed, in 1986. It does not make any difference that hundreds of people have died from this type of cancer since 1986, and that the mortality peak is expected in 2020.[29] The court had no choice but to apply the existing law. Like other episodes, the story of asbestos "carries a grim warning: *many technological inventions only reveal their harmful potential over time and may eventually have disastrous effects on human health*" (Bevilacqua 2010: 23, emphasis added). This is slow violence. And, in spite of epidemiological rationality, the population's protests and eloquent material evidence, there was no room for crimes of slow violence in Italy's legislation, in November 2014.

The reason why I add this story here is that I have thought that I could not conclude my Piedmontese slow narratives without it. Not in order to spoil the taste of Nebbiolo in your glass, however. Quite the opposite. If it is true, as Remo Bodei has written, that we are tangled in a "bio-convergence between organic and inorganic, the natural and the artificial" (Bodei 2009: 80), then this bio-convergence is a point where all experiences come together, from beauty and pleasure to the irresponsible practices of contamination. To read all these slow emergences together, in mutual diffraction, is not only a way to establish the importance of time as an aesthetic and ethical measure, in environmental discourse. More than this, it is a modest proposal to turn this "slow vision" into a cure for the shortcomings of legislation in the face of environmental crimes. It is an invitation to legislators to reflect on cases of contamination, pollution and thwarted ecological health with a glass of slowly aged wine in their hands. Diffracting these cases through that glass they might see that the chemical processes that took place in barrels and bottles, and now breathe again in their wine, are not so different from the ones through which asbestos and other hazardous substances poison bodies and ecosystems. We cannot appreciate the former and disregard the latter. Wine breathes, and so do humans—and they do it much better without asbestos in their lungs. The slow revolution we need can thus be a form of liberation only if it includes these chemical processes of trans-substantiation in the same discourse of trans-corporeal interlacements, ecological justice and legal protection. This is what our Piedmontese bodily stories of resistance are teaching us.

But, although slowly, something seems to be changing over the course of these very days. In May 2015, just a few weeks before the manuscript of this book was completed, the first comprehensive law against environmental crimes was approved almost unanimously by the Italian Parliament.[30] To pass this law, it had taken nearly two decades of democratic struggles, whose protagonists were associations of citizens contesting "legal" industrial pollution and ecomafia, from the far North to the deep South of the country, from Porto Marghera to Naples, Sicily, and all the "bone lands" suffering from slow violence. Like all things political, this law is not perfect. But still, it is a first important step toward a more accurate—and just—way of reading the wounds and stories of resistance inscribed in the bodies of this country.

We do not know how all these stories will end. But we know that the rhythm with which they want to be read is a slow pace, one made of entwined bodies and landscapes, of collectives and narratives, of desires, and of fears. When we drink a glass of Nebbiolo we shall think of the bends of the Tanaro river, of its walls of clay, the shells sailing in Sant'Agata marls. We shall be remindful of the struggles, cares, and bodies sedimented together in that wine glass. The pace of the natural-cultural world is a slow pace—it is the pace of suffering creative people and their democratic battles, the pace of the ground, of wine aging in oak barrels, of the asbestos in workers' lung cells. But this is also the pace of the conceptual revolutions that allow us to see all this together. It is the pace of a sea-change, seen with our feet on the ground of these hills: a seabed that now is high, and breathes with the wine.

Notes

1 For a survey about the Langhe's geology in relation to wine, see Panzieri 2014: 2–3.

2 http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1390/ (accessed January 16, 2015). Emphasis added.

3 The most representative among Fenoglio's novels, also translated into English, are *I ventitrè giorni della città di Alba* (*The Twenty-three Days of the City of Alba*, 1952), *Una questione privata* (*A Private Affair*, posthumous, 1963), and *Il partigiano Johnny* (*Johnny the Partisan*, posthumous, 1968).

4 On the concept of civil war applied to the Italian Resistance, see in particular Pavone 1991.

5 I owe the notion of "vegetal violence" to Priscilla Wald, to whom my gratitude goes for sharing her unpublished manuscripts with me.

6 *Il testimone* (*The Witness*, 2014) is also the title of a posthumous book including a collection of interviews of his and reviews about his work. On Revelli's work, see Cinelli 2011.

7 Cf. Revelli 1997: vxvii and xlii; Revelli, quoted in Cordero 2014: ix.

8 The text of Revelli's *lectio magistralis* is available on many websites and in the archives of the Nuto Revelli Foundation. On Revelli as a partisan chief, see Verri and Monaco 2013.

9 I cannot fail to mention here the other works Revelli devoted to the war: *La strada del davai* (*The way of davai*, 1966), where "*davai*" eloquently means "go ahead" in Russian, and *Mai tardi* (*Never too late*, 1967), where the "never too late" of the title refers to the Nazis' physical elimination. Also very important is *Il prete giusto* (*The Righteous Priest*, 1998), in which Revelli, usually very polemical against the official Church, retraced the history of Raimondo Viale, a priest who contributed to save hundreds of Jews from the Holocaust in the Cuneo area. In spite of having been acknowledged by Israel as a "Righteous among the Nations," Viale was consistently boycotted by the ecclesiastic authorities of his time.

10 In 2013, under the title *Il popolo che manca* (*The Missing People*), Antonella Tarpino has collected and creatively rearranged a selection from these two monumental works.

11 "The rhetoric says that our 'peasant race' have forever been healthy, extremely sturdy. But the fragile, the malnourished and the wrecked ones were thousands! Due to the fairly widespread incest, the venereal diseases imported from France, the percentage of the crazy and mentally deranged people was higher that one might believe" (Revelli 1997: lxxxv).

12 http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1390/ (accessed January 16, 2015.) Emphasis added.

13 Revelli's attention to this insertion from the "bone land" was probably also due to the "precious suggestions from Manlio Rossi Doria," whom he acknowledged in his Introduction (Revelli 1998: xi).

14 See Del Boca, 2007. As Gianluca Di Feo writes, "few know about the quantity of chemical weapons packed in [the ACNA's] warehouses. The damnation of the most unscrupulous chemical supply-chain was that, in order to replete Mussolini's arsenals with extraordinary devices, they did not hesitate to compromise the Peninsula's soils and waters" (Di Feo 2009: 49).

15 Even today, although it appears among the signatories, Italy is still one of the few countries not to have ratified the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants (2004). See http://chm.pops.int/Countries/StatusofRatifications/PartiesandSignatories/tabid/252/Default.aspx (accessed June 8, 2015). I thank Greg Garrard for calling my attention to this point.

16 On the environmental history of ACNA, see Poggio 1996.

17 See Arami and Scola 2015.

18 As Rob Nixon writes: "Natural agency can indeed take unexpected, sometimes heartening forms, but we should be alert to the way corporate colossi and government can hijack that logic to grant themselves advance or retrospective absolution. Crucially [...] the time frames of damage assessment and potential recovery are wildly out of sync—the deep-time thinking that celebrates natural healing is strategically disastrous if it provides political cover for reckless short-termism" (Nixon 2011: 22).

19 Data about this contamination are available in Poggio 1996.

20 The theoretical framework of this discourse is provided by the notion of "narrative ethics," which I have developed in previous essays (see Iovino 2009, 2012a).

21 These figures are available on the website of Slow Food International at http://www.slowfood.com/international/153/our-network (accessed January 20, 2015).

22 http://www.slowfood.com/international/153/our-network. (accessed January 20, 2015).

23 To quote just one example, one of Petrini's recent books, *Cibo e libertà* (*Food and Freedom*, 2013), bears as a subtitle *Stories of Liberation Gastronomy*.

24 See http://www.terramadre.info/en/ (accessed June 9, 2015).

25 Illuminating on this point is Adamson, 2009.

26 See, among other, Castleman 2004; Craighead and Gibbs 2008; McCulloch and Tweedale 2008; and Gaino 2010.

27 See Peggio 2015.

28 Bevilacqua's essay quoted here firstly appeared in Italian in 2006. See Bevilacqua 2006.

29 A very good source of information is the website of the association of the relatives of asbestos victims, AFEVA (Associazione Familiari Vittime Amianto): www.afeva.it

30 After a long debate and many changes to the original draft, the Law 1345-B "Crimes against the Environment" was approved by the Chamber of the Deputies on February 26, 2014 and definitively ratified by the Senate on May 19, 2015. See http://www.senato.it/leg/17/BGT/Schede/Ddliter/44045.htm (accessed May 26, 2015).

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Parentheses near cities or places in Italy refer to region.
Parentheses near cities or places outside Italy refer to country.